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**THE AMBIGUOUS CONSTRUCTION OF COLLECTIVE  
“FAMILY” IN THE AGE OF POST-COLLECTIVISM  
CHINA: THROUGH THE LENS OF CCTV’S SPRING  
FESTIVAL GALA**

A Dissertation Presented

by

LIN SHI

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2015

Department of Communication

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LIN SHI

Approved as to style and content by:

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Henry Geddes, Member

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Department of Communication

*In the evolution of Chinese society, there are no two themes that recur as frequently or are as pervasively influential as politics and family. Little in traditional China is not political and little in politics is uninfluenced by family. Interaction between the two often generates stories of glamorous spectacle and bewildering calamity.*

— Richard Davis (1986, p.1)

*“Family isn’t a word. It’s a sentence.”*

— The Royal Tenenbaums (2001)

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## ABSTRACT

# THE AMBIGUOUS CONSTRUCTION OF COLLECTIVE “FAMILY” IN THE AGE OF POST-COLLECTIVISM CHINA: THROUGH THE LENS OF CCTV’S SPRING FESTIVAL GALA

MAY 2015

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The dissertation, through a semiotic reading of familial imagery in CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala, explores the new propaganda and its effects on Chinese people’s political subjectivity, against the background combining the dying Communist ideology, the rise of neoliberalism, the proliferating social technologies, and the tremendous human dislocation in contemporary China.

Particularly, informed by cultural studies and ethnographic methods, this research project explores how the post-collectivism party-state insists on a mirror image of the collectivism through constructing the country as a singular super “family” from the olden time, as exemplified in the televised spectacle - CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala. In the meantime, the Gala also dramatizes the party-state’s inability to form together a seamless and unproblematic unity, as shown by the close readings of the audience



reception. In other words, although “family” enjoys a superior position in Chinese politics and society as it is rooted in commonly shared social values and in Chinese’s everyday conceptual system, upholding the “many in one” idea which reflects the legacy of the previously-dominant ideological framework, actually invokes complex and uneasy relationship between the party-state and the ordinary Chinese people. The core of this research is to “return to the individual” as Havel suggests, to help people understand politics, as well as culture, in relation to themselves individually.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

*Why should men submit to fantasies that will not nourish or sustain them? In part, More's answer is power, whose quintessential sign is that ability to impose one's fictions upon the world... The point not that anyone is deceived by the charade, but that everyone is forced to participate in it or watch it silently.*

Stephen Greenblatt in his analysis of Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1980, p.13); emphasis is original

*It has been my contention throughout this book that the most obvious material at hand for thinking politically was the family.*

—Lynn Hunt (1993, p.196)

### 1.1 The Issue and Perspective

My topic focuses on the discursive constructions and contestations of “family” in contemporary Chinese politics and society. The overriding concern is about historical consciousness and political subjectivity in light of the information environment and wider cultural politics.

Family is one of the most basic units for human beings to live together, and also the primary space containing intimate human emotions and experiences. As an archetypal figure and where the word “familiar” was derived from, “family” ideally suffuses with unconditional love and a sense of harmony, happiness, security, comfort, love, nurturing, protection, belonging, and stability. It has thus been featured in the innumerable cultural production throughout the human history.

In the meantime, “family” is never just an intimate realm suggesting pure, private humanity. Stephanie Coontz (1988) argues that family is “a ‘socially necessary illusion’ about why the social division of obligations and rights is natural or just” (p.14). Lynn Hunt (1993) contends that kinship is the basis of most organized social relations, and it is also an essential category for understanding political power. Indeed, as a symbolic package that has a natural advantage because its ideas and language usually accepted by people in the favorable way, the role of the familial metaphors in shaping people’s perceptions of social and political relations cannot be overstated: In various historical epochs and places, the metaphors of the family have been invoked to define the socio-political order and sometimes the term of political membership. For example, Lynn Hunt (1993) adapts Freud’s conception of the “family romance” to suggest that political rhetoric and action in the French revolution was inspired by familial structure and the desires it fosters. In a word, whenever a political message required a natural and “familiar” allegorical presentation, “family” is always employed.

Nevertheless, what I am interested in is not only about how culturally and emotionally charged, immediately meaningful relationship of family life are used to disguise the remote, impersonal and abstract relations between rulers and ruled or among groups of the ruled in the political narratives; but I also intend to investigate how the changing images of family help to structure narratives of power and authority and the impacts on individuals; that is, family as the immediate social and material circumstances carried on complex inherited cultural imagination and traditions, the changing perception about what a family ought to be may not only transform the family institution, but shape individual’s entire outlook on personal life, the society, and the overarching power structure. Specifically, I am interested in examining in the contemporary China, how the new discursive construction of “family” may lead people to produce and shape understandings about themselves and the overarching structure.



More specifically, the discursive construction of “family” shows two different directions in contemporary China: On the one hand, nowadays, we witness the rise of the images of conjugal family on the market-oriented mass media. I argue that this emerging discourse of a privatized and depoliticized domestic space is no longer intellectuals’ strategies of resistance as in the 1980s, but more frequently a mechanism of symbolic control manufactured by the joint force of the state and the market, as a way of diverting and “privatizing” the historical rupture and following pain. More dramatically on the other hand, the post-collectivism party-state insists on a mirror image of the collectivism through constructing the country as a singular super “family” from the olden times, as exemplified in one of the most influential television spectacles produced by the China Central TV (CCTV)’s Spring Festival Gala. I will show that more than restoring the faith or belief in the party-state or regaining its efficacy on the technologies of social engineering, the extravagant TV program is primarily aiming at assuring the power’s visibility, which in itself has an ideological effect. In the meanwhile, its inability to narrate together a seamless and unproblematic unity, the ambivalence, incoherence, and discontinuities in the seemingly monolithic construction and continuous narratives, will be carefully analyzed.

The impacts of the social and historical development on individual psyches is an interesting subject of research, but I am also interested in the ways that people collectively and deliberately imagine and think about the operations of power which may shape political and social processes. Indeed, in the meantime, with the development of Internet and other new “citizen” digital technologies, discussion and deliberation on public issues suffice the “private-in-public” arenas, in which the circulation of contesting narratives becomes a commonplace fact; “People” is no longer a singular term while the individual subjectivity proliferating. In this case, the discursive construction of family to an extent facilitates while also arrests the persuasiveness of the party-state, as it makes “family” an object of contemplative reflection, which may

invite subversive possibility, since after all, family supposes to be the private world of our own. Little by little, the discursive “family” may become a site of important contestation, at which different narratives and rhetoric come into play, competing for the claim of truth and knowledge regarding the whole range of politically-defined “reality.”

## **1.2 Research Background**

### **1.2.1 The Unique “Family” in Traditional China**

Family structures, kinship networks and their associated values can be virtually found in every culture across the globe past and present. Nevertheless, the sphere known as “*jia*,” or the family, occupies a unique central space in Chinese cultural politics. According to Deniz Kandiyoti (1988), in the reproduction of Chinese patriarchy which was underlined by Confucianism, power and authority were distributed and circulated around the extended family and kinship with the senior man at the center. It is also in this context that the Chinese imperial emperors, in the role of the senior man of a big family, assumed their socio-political authority on people under their regimes. From this perspective, it is clear that the state was envisioned not as an entity separated from the society, but rather as the family writ large. Susan Mann (1997), writing about eighteenth-century China and gender issues, also points out that “a family system... constitutes a seamless, unitary social order centered on the home and bounded by the outer reaches of the imperium” (p.15). Structurally speaking, in China regarding the social organization, family is the starting point, the primary unit and the center.

In practice, in the entire imperial China, the traditional family and kinship network took the responsibility for a whole range of local social activities involving production, distribution, education, socialization, migration and the like. During the more than two thousand years, there was no significant change in the fabric of the

“familial mode of social organization” (Yan, 2003). The rural China for example, the only changes were about the development of production tools and the import of some new agrarian staples. It is till the turn of the 20th century that came the dramatic changes in the Chinese society. Chinese family, as a result, experienced at least two crucial cultural breakups: one is the 1910s to 1920s by the radical anti-traditionalism New Culture Movement, and the other is after 1949, when the Communist regime took over China. Nevertheless, the “tradition” stayed put in the earlier period of the 20th century partly due to the known inertia of people to change the immediate ways of living and production, partly due to the limited capacity of the Nationalists to “real-ize” their ambitions. Until the Communists fully took over Chinese society after 1949, the organizational institution and even the inherited cultural imagination and traditions went through the sea changes. Specifically,

### **1.2.2 The Modern “Family Revolution”**

Judith Stacey (1983) comments that the logic of Confucian patriarchy made family transformation “the primary idiom of political discourse” (p.75). The origin of the “family revolution” discourse can be traced back to as early as the 1898 revolution, initiated by a small group of the educated upper class, and was further popularized among young students and professionals during the subsequent New Culture Movement in the 1910s and 1920s (C. K. Yang, 1965). The context is that in the throes of the old “Central Empire” entered the new world, reformers and revolutionaries both regarded China’s traditional Confucian family structure and the social hierarchies it generated as one of the major factors impeding social change and the establishment of a national consciousness and modern nation. New “family” was proposed by different political stripes, appearing as a discursive practice and competing representations in a conflicting field of power and ideology. One of the most known was the new conjugal family, which was borrowed from modern Western family ideal as a powerful

weapon in the fight against Confucian patriarchy - the core of the “oppressive Chinese tradition” - as exemplified in the traditional Chinese extended families, to modernize Chinese society and culture. Specifically, the modern imaginary of private life aiming at cultivating better qualified citizens to serve and save the country. By then, the majority of Chinese intellectuals held the strong belief that national strengthening and family reform were linked, and more important, reforming the interiority aimed directly at making the grand motherland “wealthy and powerful.” Therefore, it is less about an emancipation of the individualist spirit, but more about the concerns tightly combined with the overarching structure (for detailed discussion about China’s modern conjugal family, see Glosser, 2003).

While, at this stage, the promotion of the conjugal family was only among the educated circle as an intellectual movement. In the following years from the 1930s to the 1940s, in the intervals of wars, the Nationalist Republican government more or less promoted the new understanding of family in political and social life. That is, the attempts of reforming the family moved from ideology to social practice. However, most of these reform efforts were still limited to educated urban Chinese and were rarely supported by any large-scale political and economic reforms. It was only after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took national power that a much wider and deeper campaign of family reform or revolution was carried out deep in the grassroots level and coordinated with other socialist transformations launched by the socialist party-state, which materially changed the social structure. To be specific, under the radical socialism, the state directly and forcefully promoted family changes, and this intervention not only peeled off many public functions from the traditional family, but also invaded the most intimate details of mundane existence and tried to absorb them all into various revolutionary “collectives.” Within this process, among many others, it is said that the so-called feudalistic traditional Confucian culture was completely

wiped out. This situation didn't change until the end of the 1970s when Maoism gradually demised.

This brief review suggests that the changing images "family" had a discernable political charge, which constitutes the sharp contrast to cases in the modern Western history where, according to William Goode (1963), the privatized family was originated mainly through the separation of work from home, which was brought about by industrialization and urbanization. In other words, it means that the pragmatic reconstruction of the family, either in ideology or in practice, primarily took shape as a self-conscious political project.

### **1.2.3 The Contemporary Disintegrated Society and the Dying Ideology**

After CCP took power in 1949, in the first thirty years, ideologically, the state imbued with the Marxist doctrines which emphasize the commitment to building an egalitarian society under the dictatorship of all the proletariats, with the united peasants and workers as the vanguard. In practice, the society was radically transformed and rearranged by the party-state, in the name of reducing social inequality and eliminating any form of exploitation. For one, private property was replaced by the public ownership through collectivization.

The collectives had started to crack since 1976, when Mao passed away after three decades of dictatory rule. Since 1984, China officially entered the post-collectivism period. The period from 1976 to 1989 called "New Era" (*xin shiqi*) was marked by the historical changes that the "door" was opened again and the market economy was introduced and developed at an accelerated speed. Once again, China's social structure experienced fundamental change. The radical socialist ethos that once so effectively shaped and guided the thoughts and behaviors of most Chinese seemed to be losing the magic and was silently replacing by commercialism which at least partly followed the party-state's new ideological attempts. While, the previously

entrenched egalitarian-based ideological conviction was never formally given up. The revolutionary legacy still played an important symbolic role in the post-Mao culture.

The June Fourth Tiananmen event in 1989 signaled another historical rupture. From then on, even though China still claims to be a communist country at its “primitive stage of socialism,” communism as a system of values and ideas that used to be followed by genuine adherents, has fallen apart. What remained are the lingering discursive convention and the old power structure, while even these two are gradually changing. The party-state since then has been pursuing the new source of legitimacy and the “developmentism” (C.-C. Lee, He, & Huang, 2007) comes to the fore, responding in part to the ideological crisis and also in part to the accelerated neoliberal principles.

However, the rapid commercialization and globalization has its negative consequence. The gap between the rich and the poor is getting larger and larger, and grows to be the most severe social problem in China since the 1990s. Concretely, as China’s economic reform is vigorously speeding up, most state-owned enterprises have been either closed down or forced to face to the market. As a result, millions of workers who grew up with the promises of the socialist “iron rice bowl” (*tie fanwan*, literally: your job is secured for life) were laid off. For these people, on the one hand, the growing-up experiences didn’t prepare them for the psychological shock as the previously fully rejected capitalism comes back and they thus lost their positions and even identities in the new system whatever it calls; on the other hand, there is almost no any formal welfare system ready for these laid-off workers. In a word, behind the glamorous commercial prosperity displayed in the cities, there are profound and disturbing gaps between classes, and between the ruler and the ruled.

The party-state has invested tremendous resources and energies on distracting or concealing the diversified social conflicts, also numerous pedagogical imperatives

and disciplinary practices have been deployed to unify the increasingly disintegrated society and stabilize the system.

#### **1.2.4 The New Ideological Project “Harmonious Society” and the Return to Traditional Family Ethics**

Succeeding Jiang Zemin from 2002, Hu Jintao became the “core” of the fourth generation leadership of the CCP and People’s Republic of China (PRC). In the sixteenth CCP Central Committee Conference in 2004, Hu officially proposed his most important ideological project, to establish “*hexie shehui*” (harmonious society) which, according to him, can be achieved through a rehabilitation of the traditional family ethics (further by revisiting Confucian canons and emphasizing the ethical education). It is clearly a historical and ideological breakup with Mao’s “class struggle.” To be specific, as Mao’s “class struggle” no longer functions well as the central organizing political imaginary in this era, the party-state is seeking to construct new techniques of governing by resorting to China’s traditional cultural heritage and designating a normative traditional family as the new unifying logic. Indeed, no other discursive site exceeds the power of “family” to condense the complex emotions and imaginations about China’s past and future while working in a way favorable to the state ideology. The aim of the construction is to absorb as many subjects as possible into the embrace of the new state order, upon which an imaginary unanimity rests. It represents a critical case in an authoritarian context in which the stark political ideology has lost its appealing power, the regime has to resort to the cultural and traditional, thereby “the ideological principles that support a given arrangement of power are translated into regularized patterns of emotion and sentiment” (Klein, 2003, p.7). In other words, China after the spring of 1989’s crackdown is a good case to understand how an ideologically non-hegemonic authoritarian regime uses rhetoric and symbols to produce political powers, and “successfully” maintain its governance.

To fully understand the complex dimensions of the discursive constructed “family” in contemporary Chinese political discourse, we must track its circulation among its many discursive locations through different time periods. First of all, I am going to look closely at how the master narrative of “family” is made and what it is made to mean in the most influential TV program ever produced in the Mainland China —

### **1.2.5 CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala: The Most Telling Case**

In this dissertation, CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala (Gala) serves as the major springboard for discussion.

#### **1.2.5.1 The Spring Festival**

First of all, the Spring Festival, or the Chinese Lunar New Year, is the most important festival for Chinese people. It usually falls between late January and early February according to the lunar calendar. It is a moment to celebrate the achievement in the past year and to weave hopes for a new one, and also a moment to renew the common bonds by making them visible and “materialized” in symbols, rhetoric and ritualistic acts.

Every time when approaching the end of the lunar year, there will be a list of traditional celebration activities: dusting and cleaning, pasting new couplets and wearing new clothes, giving red packets with money inside to young generation in the family, staying overnight on Lunar New Year’s eve, sacrificing to gods in Chinese folk religions, firing firecrackers and fireworks, etc. Most importantly, on New Year’s eve, all the members of a big family come and enjoy a feast together - a special emotionally charged occasion for family reunions and celebration. In the era marked



by mobility and dislocation, this kind of return and reunion becomes more attractive and meaningful.<sup>1</sup>

Different from what E. J. Hobsbawm and T. O. Ranger (1983/2012) claimed to be “invention of tradition,” Spring Festival Celebration isn’t a tradition “started” or “initiated” not long ago - All these customs of celebration have existed for a long time, while the rapid economic and social changes since 1978 have resulted in some new characteristics of celebrating the Spring Festival. The biggest change is that since the television got into the domestic spaces of majority of Chinese people in the 1980s, precisely since 1983, each and every year, CCTV presents an extravagant Spring Festival Gala, which has turned the folk ceremony to the celebration of “revival of Chinese Nation” and the “reunion of Chinese all over the world.” The reconstitution of the unified and unitary national family is engraved in each and every Gala. As having been consistently presented at each and every year’s magic turning moment for almost three decades, the CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala has become not only a media spectacle with remarkably commercial profit, but more importantly it has been institutionalized and legitimized as an indispensable part of Chinese Lunar New Year celebration activities. As Bin Zhao (1998) forcefully expounds, being “Chinese” now means one more thing – to watch the CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala. Specifically,

#### **1.2.5.2 CCTV’s Gala: The No.1 Show**

On the annual basis, every broadcast of the CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala lasts four and a half hours: from 8:00 p.m. Beijing Time on the Lunar New Year’s eve to around 12:30 a.m. the next day. By bringing together different types of performances, such as singing, dancing, cross-talk (*xiangsheng*), mini-drama (*xiaopin*), folk opera, magic shows, acrobatic performance, etc., this television spectacle showcases the Chinese

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<sup>1</sup>One important point to note here is that, the Spring Festival is mainly Han ethnicity’s traditional festival (the major ethnic group in China), but it is constructed by the central government as a national holiday for all other ethnicities.

national family's achievements and unity. It has been a unique scene in the industry of Chinese television broadcasting.

It is regarded by media critics (e.g., Geng, 2003) as the most influential variety show has ever produced in Mainland China. It has been in continuous running for thirty one years, enjoying ratings from the low of nearly 38% to as high as 67% since such data became available in 1994. The ratings are higher than any other shows (Pan, 2010). After several years of field observation, Dru C. Gladney (2004) reports that "most families from Beijing to Xinjiang on New Year's eve preferred to stay at home and watch this program surrounded by relatives and a few close friends" (p.55). This might be partially because of the state ownership of all media outlets for a long term, the Gala is practically the only available variety show on the screen at that specific night. All other local TV stations, besides CCTV's other channels, have to put their own programs on hold and instead relay the Gala from beginning to end. In this case, CCTV's Spring Festival Gala enjoys the same privilege as the CCTV's premier 7:00 pm news broadcasting.

This level of ratings and influence made the Gala the major source of CCTV's advertising revenue. For example, in 2002, the gala had 10 minutes of advertisements but brought in \$304 million (35.4% of CCTV's annual total) advertising revenue. The figure rose to \$478 million in 2005 (47.1% of CCTV's annual total) (Pan, 2010). As a response, as early as in 1993, CCTV rented three satellite channels in Asia and two satellite channels in North America to broadcast the Gala live worldwide. Since then, the Gala has created an annual festivity without border by reaching Chinese communities around the globe. Another example came from October 1997 when CCTV even built up a 2,000-square meter, high-tech studio solely for staging its Spring Festival Gala.

Beyond these cold numbers, let's again take a closer look at the text:

### 1.2.5.3 A Televised Re-invention of Festival Celebration of “Family” Reunion

The Gala not only gives all Chinese an opportunity to celebrate the Spring Festival together, it is also an important channel through which the central government speaks to millions of Chinese people either at home or abroad. This central discursive feature of this show, generally, is to displace specific family reunion with the images that all Chinese transcend their economic, political, ethnic and geographic differences and celebrate their common bonds together. Specifically, through the well-prepared and carefully censored performances and other meaningful designs, the Gala weaves the cultural cosmos of China to show the Chinese nation is a family with common ancestors; the admission into this “family” comes from submission to the blood tie and engagement in the “traditional” Chinese cultural practices; on this scene, the country is the home and the party-state guards the common ancestors and shelters all family members. “*Guojia*,” in Chinese literally means “national family,” which is discursively incapable of differentiating the nation, country and party-state. Therefore, by the sleights of hand, at this night on this stage, “nation,” “country” and the “state” are one and the same. In a word, CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala is never an ordinary entertainment show but one of the most important media events responding to the CCP’s ideological projects, by, according to Zhang Ziyang, the 1993 gala director, “combining the strongest medium and the most unifying and traditional Chinese folk festival together.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>He made this statement in the *2002’s Spring Festival eve special program*, produced by CCTV on February 12, 2002.

## 1.3 The Theoretical Concerns

### 1.3.1 Making the Power Visible: The Self-confirming System of Representation

The Gala provides a contemplative space for a various set of tensions in contemporary China: between myth and reality, tradition and modernity, the rural country and the urban city, the collective communal mandate and individual happiness, and so forth. Nevertheless, above all, I am curious why the party-state sticks to construct the unified and unitary national “family” on the Gala, regardless many if not most resources it invokes are growing outdated if not absurd? Does it suggest that there is a different “pay off” other than what we call “hegemony” or “legitimacy?” My intent is to demonstrate that the well-prepared CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala is not only a manipulative project of the state to ensure social control and ideological domination but more importantly, it is essential to the party-state’s self-identity. It is, to borrow from Ann Anagnost (1997), a “self-referential reality” that in itself has an ideological effect.

Specifically, James Scott (1998) insists on the importance of “legibility” of its subjects to the modern nation-state. He discusses about the modern nation-state builders’ standardization process, and argues that the goal of such standardization is not simply knowledge, but power: “The builders of the modern nation-state do not merely describe, observe, and map; they strive to shape a people and landscape that will fit their techniques of observation” (p.82). Scott’s point about why and how the nation-state forced people to organize their lives in ways that the state could “see” fits the nationalist/statist project ever since the Republican regime and got to the acme in the Maoist era. But I will argue that nowadays, instead of demanding “overseeing,” the Chinese party-state casts a monumental effort for itself being “seen.” And departing from overt rituals of public humiliation and other uses of physical or ideological violence in its early years, the current leadership in China emphasizes the

soft ideological or “cultural” aspects that make power visible in the post-Tiananmen China.

Or put it in Foucault’s metaphor of the panopticon (1979), which can be employed to explain the workings of power in the first modern regime in China, the Nationalist one, and the first thirty years of Mao’s radical socialist regime. While, nowadays, the point is that it is no longer the tower at the dark center casts invisible watchful gaze at the people, but it becomes an illumined stage, as exemplified by the case of CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala, the party-state needs to make itself visible because the people’s return gaze now is crucial to complete and realize its power, if not the very existence.

There is also empirical support on the self-confirming system of representations coming from other contexts, for example, the colonial Egypt - Timothy Mitchell (1988) confirms that the “reality or objectivity of the social resided entirely in its representational nature,” and “more and more to be built into things” (p.126-127).

### **1.3.2 New Political Subjectivity in Making**

The communist regime established in 1949 is called “People’s Republic.” The mass identity “people” constitutes foundation of the legitimacy of this sovereignty and is put in the shrine, for whom the Party becomes the solely authorized voice. As forcefully expounded by Hanna Arendt(1973), the party-state by then “strives to organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all of humanity were just one individual” (p.438). As a result, in the following political and mass education campaigns, ordinary Chinese were stitched into one collective subject position. The situation has radically changed as the used-to-be totalistic communist regime is now enthusiastically reconnecting to the capitalist “world” and has built up the peculiar “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” Understandably, it is an era lack of the true belief or emotional commitment towards the regime. While, what does

not change is that the Chinese party-state after Mao still tries hard, if not harder, to manage contests over signification. All together, it makes the PRC a fascinating case to study the making of historical consciousness and political subjectivity of the ordinary people who live within it.

Concretely, in terms of the symbolic control, during the Maoist era, the image of ubiquitous, all-seeing Mao and the proliferation of occasions for Chinese people to demonstrate their obedience and loyalty to him once made people internalized their own surveillance, that is, imagined themselves under the regime's observation all the time (actually, it was probably the truth). While, in the early post-totalitarian China, on the one hand, we saw a climate in which the circulation of politically improper narratives became a commonplace fact. For example, if a person cannot share and laugh at the political jokes at a dinner party, he or she may not make any friends that night. On the other hand, everybody was fluent in and internalized more or less the official language. It was not only the "seatbelt" when they talked in the public arena, but for those decades, it was perhaps the only language they knew when they talked about public issues, political in particular, "seriously." Now in a period of tremendous economic development and dislocation, with the development of the new citizen media, we see the insistent contestations and disturbances to any monolithic official order. But we must be aware that sometimes the largely tolerated criticism could function to reassure the repressive forces' dominance rather than undermining it. In particular, when talking about specific topics, the set of official "tyranny of language" is still the only language the ruled can speak of.

By pouring official sanctioned images and narratives that are carrying specific ideological message into Chinese people's public and personal spaces, CCTV's Spring Festival Gala somehow "colonizes" the most celebrated traditional holiday in China. In other words, both the way of celebrating the tradition and the organization of daily life during this most important holiday, under the escalating mass media-mediated

display, now are saturated with the deliberately delivered political message. It must have certain impacts on the way people understand what they inherited and cherished, and further on the way people understand themselves. In this dissertation, I will reveal and analyze how local communities and ordinary Chinese interpret and make sense of the political imaginary in their concrete, living experiences, in order to exhibit the (re)formation of certain type of political subjectivity.

In *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produces Apathy in Everyday Life* (1998), Nina Eliasoph, based on the solid ethnographic research within activist groups, provides thought-provoking ideas about how being “close to home,” penetrating the pervasive culture of political avoidance and common understanding of it as apathy or self-interest, functions as an important, organic motivation of participation and is forming new political subjectivity. “Home” or “Family” is indeed a meaningful starting point of democratic politics, even in an undemocratic environment.

### **1.3.3 The “Material,” Dynamic Understanding of Ideology and the Contestation of “Family”**

This dissertation offers what Louis Althusser might call a “materialist” approach to ideology. Also in his famous essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (1971), regarding the conceptualization of ideology, Althusser contended the “negative” interpretations of the notion as formulated by a number of influential Marxist theorists such as Gramsci’s “false consciousness.” Instead, Althusser believed that ideology worked to a large extent on the “social unconsciousness.” In his definition, ideology is a “representation” of “the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (p.44). Ricoeur (1986) explains it as “an ideology is both lived *and* imaginary, it is the lived *as* imaginary” (p.136). To put it plainly, since the imaginary relation is lived, we should not look at “imaginary” as “lacking in reality,” as the symbolic is not any less powerful than the material. Using Althusser’s own

example, the man's 180 degree physical conversion is real while the relationship between the hailer and the turner is reproduced in the very act of turning. Therefore, one's imaginary relationship to the world is not true or false but instead the constant reproduction of the social world through lived, material practices.

In the meantime, although Althusser's lived and imaginary ideology is very thought-provoking, as it focuses on the observable and traceable materials, I have to admit that his monolithic definition of ideology cannot suitably explain how political change occurs. Instead, Raymond Williams (1977) separates ideology into three subcategories that are always present in society: dominant, residual, and emergent. The dominant ideology is the frame through which most people view the world; a residual ideology is an outdated ideology that is still relevant to some portion of society; and an emergent ideology is a view of the world that exists outside the dominant group. Political change, Williams argues, sometimes occurs when the dominant ideology incorporates emergent ideologies into its framework. Williams' schema on analyzing ideological practices is more applicable to this empirical research.

Specifically, this dissertation starts from exploring the trajectory and function of the political construct "family" in modern Chinese history; then in contemporary China, I contend the accepted wisdom that the post-Mao period has seen an end to ideology and a return to a more "rational" pragmatism in the political and economic spheres. Instead, I argue that this is a moment the party-state constantly feels anxious and necessary to exert its power and authority on the ideological level, while since many old narratives have become too jarring and unable to address new subjects emerging through privatization, the newly obtained mobility and the rise of the new widely accessible electronic media, the discursively constructed "family" once again come to the fore, which intended to make a diffuse and fragmented reality into a representable whole. In this process, the culturally and emotionally resonant "family" is supposed to lend strength (and, by extension, credibility and legitimacy) to the state



discourse. The point is not only on promoting the collective imagination as a subtle form of social control, but more importantly, on its own “visibility.” In the meantime, this culturally and emotionally resonant symbol is not easy to control, since after all “family” is supposed to be part of our own private world, which gives the ruled room for maneuver and negotiation.

## **1.4 Précis of the Study**

Here is a brief outline of how the dissertation unfolds.

The present chapter introduces my research project and situated it within brief theoretical and historical contexts, including clarifying key concepts and terms, mapping out the terrain of interest.

The second chapter presents a historical account of “family reform” discourses and practices since the end of the nineteenth century and focuses on the destiny of family in the collectivization era under the Maoist regime. The main objective of this chapter is to situate this study within a historical and comparative framework.

Since the late 1970s, the pragmatic transformation has cast significant influences on Chinese social structure, Chinese people’s private life and also their symbolic world. Chapter 3 is a historical survey of the material and discursive transformations in the post-Mao China, in order to offer insights to look into this particular media spectacle of interest - the CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala.

In Chapter 4, I introduce the Spring Festival Gala and analyze how its three-decade performance provides a particular and exemplary case of official construction of the united and unitary “national family.” The ideological substance of the Gala is discussed in great detail, as well as the various symbolic strategies that the Gala has been employing. The changing emphasis on the representations of family ideal is also acknowledged.

Chapter 5 moves on to discuss the second major component of the project: a study of audience. In this part, first, the general picture of the development of Chinese people's historical consciousness and political subjectivity is outlined. Then I analyze the specific voices I collected in my participatory observation and in-depth interviews regarding the Gala. Also in the chapter I call for a move that goes beyond the call of "resistance."

In Chapter 6, I conclude the thesis, pointing out the power and powerlessness of the "national family" metaphor and the potential problem of the shared symbolic field of "family", and look ahead to future ways of building up new political citizenship.

## CHAPTER 2

### “FAMILY REFORM” IN MODERN AND SOCIALIST CHINA

*As both as an institution and as a conception, the family mediates between people’s definitions of themselves as individuals and as members of society. It is one of the main tools we use to understand and define ourselves in relation to the overarching social structure.*

—Stephanie Coontz (1988, p.13)

*No institution has experienced the vicissitudes of the political, economic, and social changes that have marked the PRC’s first half century more sharply than the family.*

—William P. Alford and Shen Yuanyuan (2004, p. 238)

#### 2.1 Preamble

This chapter presents a historical account of “family reform” discourses and practices since the end of the nineteenth century and focuses on the destiny of family in the collectivization era under the Maoist regime. The main objective of this chapter is to situate this study within a historical and comparative framework.

Specifically, nowadays, in Chinese daily life, we quite often come across slogans like “loving our factory as our family,” “treaty the school as family,” “we all live in the big socialist family,” “this neighborhood is our home, then it is everybody’s duty to cherish it.” Also, every Spring Festival eve, the most important Chinese traditional holiday, CCTV will present a four-and-a half-hour extravagant televised spectacle

teemed with songs sung for the “big family with fifty-six brothers and sisters” (Han nationality plus the 55 minor nationalities).

These expressions do not come out of the blue. Instead, they show traces of the state sponsored nationalist flavored conception of “family” since the end of the 19th century. Especially during Maoist radical socialism these conceptions were by and large put into practice. In this chapter, my discussion will start from the turn of the 20th century when the “family reform” discourse entered the spotlight, focus on the historical period from 1949, the establishment of PRC, till 1976, the end of Cultural Revolution, and gauge the (un)changing family relations and family ideology about it during different time spans around the over three fourths century. The aim is to reveal the intervention of the state power and authority on redefining family institution and more important, people’s conceptions regarding their immediate life experience. I am going to answer the following questions: What was the new family ideal the party-state tried to construct? In what ways and to what degree the party-state materialized the reconstruction of people’s conception about family? In addition, as we know that the development of new cultural politics is complex and reiterative, then how about the new political imaginary and subjectivities emerged through this process?

In the following part first let’s see the traditional understanding of Chinese family and its modern experiences:

## **2.2 The Tradition: Family in the Confucian Horizon**

### **2.2.1 The “Relational” Selves and the All-encompassing Family**

The Western ethical and religious understandings all support the predominance of individual autonomy. But in the Confucian worldview, which has influenced Chinese civilization for over two thousand of years, the “relational” selves are predominant, that is, social interactions and relations are the essential definers of the existence of

any certain human being. And the basic unit of social interactions and relations is the traditional extended family. In other words, to develop an all-around, flourishing human being must “begin at home.” No one is a good citizen if he is not above all a good son, good father, good husband. No individual human being will remain, according to Confucius, if these important layers of relations are peeled away.

In the meanwhile, there is a huge difference between traditional China and Western modern industrial countries, regarding the pattern of family life. Concretely, for centuries, China as basically an agrarian society with little societal mobility, the family was the basic unit for economic activities such as production, distribution, and consumption. Local communities were made up of one or several extended families or clans and were largely self-sufficient. The local gentry were obliged to organize and assist local families to work cooperatively to fulfill other public functions, such as establishing local schools and supporting the local talents from poor families, or building and repairing local roads or major irrigation systems. Even, according to David Wong (2004), in the traditional China, below the county level, the ideal officials should be considered more like an arbiter of disputes than a judge, since his task in these situations was to mediate conflicts between two or more local families, not to make the decision about who was right and who was wrong. In a word, in the imperial China, the Western-defined divide between public and private sphere of life was largely not applicable. Instead, the family encompassed virtually all aspects of one’s “private” and “public” life. Direct state intervention into the family was rare and limited. The popular Chinese saying - “The heaven is high and the emperor is far away” (*tiangao huangdi yuan*) - reflects this type of relationship.

### **2.2.2 The Societal Order begins with the Family**

Structurally speaking, the traditional Chinese society regarded the family as the core. The anthropologist Fei Xiaotong (1992 [1947]) introduced Chinese organization-

al principles through the concept of “differential mode of association” (*chaxu geju*). He employed two metaphors to convey the organizational difference between Western and Chinese societies. Western societal structure is represented by straws collected to form a haystack, and Chinese societal structure is represented by the ripples caused by a rock thrown into water. According to him, in China “family” is an elastic notion. Kinship networks, the fundamental relationship in Chinese society is just like the concentric ripples caused by the rock. The structural relationship between one individual and the central government begins with one’s own clan (*jiazu*), then expanded to the lineage (*zongzu*), and then the third and final step comes the national family (*guozu*).

Cosmologically, the traditional Chinese societal order also begins with the family. In the “Sequence of the Gua” piece in one of the oldest Chinese classics *I Ching* (The Book of Changes), it contends that “After Heaven and Earth have come into existence, there are myriad beings. After myriad beings have come into existence, there are male and female. After male and female are distinguished, there comes the relationship of husband and wife. After husband and wife have united together, there arrive father and son. After there are father and son, there come ruler and minister. After there are ruler and minister, there come high and low. After high and low exist, then etiquette can be appropriately practiced” (Huang, 1998, p.264). It clearly looks at the components of family relations, relations between - male and female, husband and wife, father and son, especially the last pair -as the foundation of a proper societal order. Till the West Han Dynasty (206 BC - 24 BC), this set of ideas were institutionalized into the self-sufficing and patriarchy family and clan system which then became the central governing code for the Chinese society for centuries, emphasizing “rulers guide subjects, fathers guide sons and husbands guide wives.” It clearly suggests that the governance over the family, the community, the polity, the cosmos is only differing from the population and the area confined by various borders,

while the modes and ways of governance are basically the same. In other words, the family is the society in miniature and the society is a family writ large. As a result, the properly regulated family would be the basis of a well-governed, stable and strong state, and disorder in one reflected the possible disorder in the other.

Another way to expand my point is to consider the central role of “filial piety” in Confucian teaching. The Confucian classic *Analects* explicitly states that “piety filial” is the root, “the root having taken hold, then the proper way will grow therefrom” (1.2). That is, loving one’s parents is the entry point for moral competence, and one must extend filial piety beyond his own immediate family circle to “respect the aged and love the young ones in other families” as Mencius stated. In the end, it defines the relationship between the ruler (as the father and mother of the people) and the people (as the junior members of his extended family) - the good emperor father should nurture, protect and guide his subjects-children, while the moral person will return the feeling to his emperor father as loyalty. Walter S. Slote (1998) put it in this way that “filial piety was the principal instrument through which [the authoritarian system of Confucianism] was established and maintained” (p.46).

### **2.3 The Modern “Family Reforms”**

Since Qing Dynasty was defeated by the Western modern industrial powers during the Opium Wars in the 1840s-1860s and the first Sino-Japanese War in 1894-1895, the “Middle Kingdom” had been forced to start the journey later known as “a century of humiliation” (*shijie chiru*). Partly as the result, the educated elite by then who used to be greatly proud of the nation’s claimed superior position in civilization now fumbled to look at “China” in modern political, economic and geographical terms. Quickly, the concerned Chinese arrived at the consensus that the resolution of all the crises demanded fundamentally a strong nation-state. Different measures in realizing national dreams of wealth and power started brewing, which gradually changed the

texture of the whole system, and undermined its original balance. While, the old empire cannot or would not respond effectively. The revolution came to the fore. The Revolution of 1911<sup>1</sup> triggered China's journey to modernity, which at the same time forcefully challenged traditional "familial mode of social organization" (Yan, 2003).

Actually, before the 1911's revolution, at the turn of the 20th century, the traditional hierarchical family, the conservative values and structural inequalities it upheld had experienced a wave of vigorous attacks from educated urbanities, as the main factor that was holding China back from being modern, wealthy and powerful. The major educators and leaders of the failed reform movement of 1898, such as Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao and Tan Sitong, had all proposed radical reforms of the traditional Chinese family. Kang even suggested the complete abolition of the family as a precondition for larger social reform (Deng, 1994). A number of outspoken articles joined in the chorus, such as "On the Abolition of the Family" (*Hui Jia Lun*), "On the Possibilities of Abolishing the Family" (*Hui Jia Tan*), "On Family Revolution" (*Geming Jiating Shuo*), "On Women's Role in Family Revolution" (*Nuzi Jiating Geming Shuo*), etc. All together, they certainly represent a sudden, radical turning over of Confucian social and familial relationships.

All these preparation and fermentation was further popularized in the radical anti-Confucian "New Culture Movement" which happened mainly from 1917 to 1923. In this movement, among many other reevaluations of China's social and political institutions, the students and new professionals in the city blamed the traditional Confucian family for the negative images of a silent China, a sorrowful China, a poisoned China and a sick China, a China ferociously autocratic but gradually dysfunctional, and looked to the West for new ideas and models of this primary institution. As a

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<sup>1</sup>It is the Chinese bourgeois democratic revolution led by Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, which overthrew the Qing Dynasty and ended China's imperial history.



result, the modern nuclear family which emphasizes the conjugal love and pleasure was introduced. While, as paradoxically as Susan Glosser (2003) forcefully expounds that, although different imaginings of the private family were produced and different ideal images and relations of the family members were accordingly constructed, this conjugal family emerged at this stage was ultimately less about an emancipation of the individualist spirit, but more about the concerns tightly combined with the overarching structure.

In other words, it is clear that China's modern family reform discourse was dominated by the direct nationalist concern. Earlier in Liang Qichao's writings, who was one of the premier Chinese modern thinkers and reformists in the late Qing Dynasty, an opinion recurring is that the Chinese had been so tightly captured by their extended patriarchy families and there was no way to develop a modern national consciousness. Later on, the national father Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, in a 1924's speech agreed with and elaborated this point. This situation was clearly changing in the educated circle. As a result, mass education and implementation came forward.

Accordingly, since 1911 under the Republican administration, many nationalist officials tried to seek ways to break the traditional family centered worldview, and reconstruct new type of family which allowed individual Chinese to easily identify with their national consciousness. Susan Glosser (Glosser, 2003) among others provides a comprehensive account about how the Nationalists used the newly rising conjugal family as a lever to free the individual from the excessive grip of the extended patriarchy family ties. In the meantime, they clearly didn't imagine completely abolishing the family institution but just tried to pull the family into the purview of the state, where it could be "watching" by state agencies. Therefore, I would assert that the modern "family reform" discourses were ultimately a state-building project which first aimed at national wealthy and powerful and later in the hands of the Nationalist officials mainly at increasing state control and the legibility of the society.

Nevertheless, as we know that in its less than four decades of administration in the mainland China, the Republican government encountered a number of major foreign and domestic wars. This national project had never been fully implemented. During this time, the fundamental social system still maintained to be the patriarchy one. While, the system was obviously declining under the waves of impacts from political and economic reforms and changes on social thoughts and behavioral norms, even in the remote rural area. The new order and new organizational system was still in searching.

Different from under the republican regime where was always the extra-state space acknowledged, under the following communist administration, the party-state weakened the family solidarity and authority to an extreme degree, the people were told that in order to build up the new revived, strong and proud China, they must redirect their energies and resources from family loyalty to a greater loyalty toward the unified and unitary national family called “socialist communal family” (*shehui zhuyi dajiating*) for all the people. Below are the steps the Communists followed.

## **2.4 Construct the Socialist Communal Family in Ideology and Practice**

### **2.4.1 Introduction**

The CCP insists on claiming the legacy of the New Culture Movement; that is, the Communists insist that fighting against the Chinese oppressive feudalistic tradition is the Party’s legitimate source of origin. The Confucian patriarchy, as exemplified in the traditional Chinese extended families was certainly a shooting target. More than that, in fact, many New Culture radicals were more or less influenced by Marxism, and some of them were early unswerving advocates. It is this group of people who introduced and preliminarily localized Marxist’s theory into China, which not only pointed out its approach and momentum of social development, but also pictured the image of

future society: It would be a communist society where all the important means of production belong to the public. Under this circumstance, “family” itself, as the basis of private ownership, meant to be eliminated in the communist society (Engels, 2010).

As a self-claimed Marxist party, the CCP emphasizes that there is a linear progress regarding the transition of human society, that is, from primitive society to feudalistic society to capitalist society to socialist society then to communist society. It is said that China passed over the capitalist stage and entered the socialist society directly. As the intermediate step between capitalist and communist society, the primary task for socialists is to prepare for the materialization of Communism, and the socialist society would be the last society with the class; according to Marx, in the Communist society, people work together and share the goods together, that is, distribute according to needs, since the society has already been wealthy enough to afford and satisfy everybody. As a result, the whole society is united together and human beings care about each other and help each other. This rosy image requires that all the recourses belong to the people, that is, the collective ownership completely replaces the private one. In the end, the existence of family, even country, will be eliminated.

Under the thirty years of radical socialism, responding to the call “Running into Communism” (*paobu jinru gongchanzhuyi*), besides the construction in the economic realm, the Chinese Communists also forcefully put the New Culture radicals’ vehement cultural denunciation towards the patriarchal system into practice through a series of large-scale political or pedagogical campaigns, which first started vigorously from the countryside, where the patriarch’s grip on the family remained as strong as ever.<sup>2</sup> Then the CCP pushed the state further into the family than any regime before

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<sup>2</sup>In fact, before 1949, the Republican government had already started to penetrate the rural society. The difference is that by then the purpose of the state was only to increase its tax revenue and collect other recourses from the rural area. Even if there were ideas about transforming the rural China, at that time the ruling government cannot fully put them into practice. The studies

it had done, especially in the Mao years, which exerted an extraordinary influence in people's daily life details. When the reconstruction of family reached the acme, even the conjugal family what was promoted by the majority of the New Culture elites came under heavy attack, as the nuclear family was said to transmit capitalist ideology, instilling the values of selfishness and possessiveness. In the end, any small family was supposed to be abolished, clearing up the ground to build up the new normative socialist communal family.<sup>3</sup>

To be noted, during this process, although the Communists fiercely criticized the patriarchy system, and reminded each other to "make a revolution in the depths of your soul," in fact the Communist control of Chinese society has rarely been as complete as we imagined. In the following analysis, I will reveal and analyze the construction process of the socialist communal family in a chronological order, in the meantime, show the meaningful incomplete.

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done by Lin Yaohua (Y. Lin, 1974), Yang Maochun (2000), and Prasenjit Duara (1988) all show the reach of the state power into the rural society by then, as explicated by the official projects such as building up the public schools, local large-scale construction work initiated and administrated from top-down, nominating and electing local officials, etc. This set of behaviors conflicted with the traditional extended family and clan's public functions, and triggered the changes of many aspects of the rural society. Nevertheless, before the establishment of the PRC, the majority of social reforms were limited within the scope of the city, and most of the time they would not touch the political or economic bases. It is after 1949 that remodeling family started from the grassroots and got promoted extensively and intensively, that is, as a part of the state-driven socialist revolution got vigorously deployed all over the country crossing different social strata, as Andrew G. Walder (1986) argues, "of all the varieties of modern authoritarianism, the communist state has been among the most stable, the most thoroughly organized, the most autonomous from organized interests, and the most complete in its reform of prior political and economic arrangements" (p.1).

<sup>3</sup>There is also the practical, immediate necessity for promoting the "unified family" under Mao's regime: as aforementioned, during the Nationalist era, the country went through decades of wars. When the Communist took over the power, the country had been plagued by significant regional divisions and was experiencing tremendous resistance from the Southwest and Northwest border areas, not to mention, Hong Kong and Taiwan were drifting away. Internationally, Americans in the early 1950s and the Soviets from the early 1960s both seriously challenged the existence of this new Republic.

#### 2.4.2 The Rural Revolution in Practice and in Discourse

My discussion of “family revolution” will start from the rural China. China was overwhelmingly an agrarian country. When the CCP took over the power, the rural population weighed the predominant proportion, and the rural society was still rooted within the horizons of a Confucian world. We know that as early as March 1927, Mao described the peasants in his influential *Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan* as the most economically exploited and politically oppressed social group, who then were naturally the most revolutionary and progressive forces, and qualified to play the leading role in the struggle against the imperialism, feudalism and the bureaucrat-capitalism (later metaphorically called “three mountains”). Therefore, in Mao’s vision, revolution should be taking place in the countryside rather than in the morally corrupted and politically conservative cities. He did achieve the great success by following the principle. Therefore, after 1949, the newly established republic still primarily focused on the rural area to start their socialist construction.<sup>4</sup>

Under the radical socialist construction, relevant socio-political events majorly based on the rural area include the Land Reform (1950-1953); the Agricultural Collectivization (1953-1957); the People’s Commune Movement and the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960); the Socialist Education Movement (1962-1965); the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). I will discuss the construction of socialist communal family by mainly following one event after another, and argue that although the practice of radical socialism in rural China did not, as leaders of the CCP intended to, build up this unified and unitary socialist communal family, it indeed led significant changes happened in the family relations and family ideology, one aspect as C. K. Yang (1965)

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<sup>4</sup>Artist and public intellectual Danqing Chen in a recent media interview put it in an interesting way that the first thirty years of PRC’s societal practices was centered around an attempt to a complete “rustication,” then the following thirty years is a story about full “urbanization.”

observed and commented on in the middle of the transformation: “The present urge toward state collectivism calls upon the individual to sacrifice for a group far different from the family; and whatever its ultimate fate under the Communist regime, individualism has already performed the function of alienating the individual from family loyalty” (p.173).

#### **2.4.2.1 Land Reform: Overturning the Landscape of Traditional Extended Family**

In the Chinese modern history, it is Dr. Sun Yat-Sen who in 1924 first called for “Return land to the tiller.” While, before the Communist revolution, in the rural China, land was concentrated in the hands of a few local landlords and some rich farmers. Most peasants worked for these big landowners. Land Reform was the first step of social reconstruction after the founding of the PRC. The reasons that the CCP chose Land Reform as the first step are based on the deep understanding of the significant role the land plays in the centuries-long small-scale peasant economy. By promising them a piece of land of their own, the CCP successfully mobilized millions of peasants and strengthened the “dictatorship of the proletariat” in the early stage.

#### **2.4.2.2 The Class Label and Changing Landscape in the Local Community**

In the meanwhile, everyone within the new society was assigned a class label in terms of either their (or their parents’) economic status or sometimes class “attitudes” by then. Class labels included “poor peasant,” “middle peasant,” “rich peasant,” and “landlord.” The latter two groups, plus “counterrevolutionary” and other “bad element,” were indicated as class enemies. To a great extent, these class labels determined people’s access to any socialist “goods,” both tangible and intangible, for three decades until they were officially abolished in 1979 when the economic reforms came to the fore.

Land Reform was claimed as a revolution that proletarian peasants cast on feudal landlords. Its significance not just came from the equal allocation of the land, but from the fact that together with the new “class” labeling, it dramatized ruptures in the social fabric and even completely shook the economic foundation and social landscape of the local community. The prior social hierarchy and traditional power structure in the rural community was broken during this radical attempt of social transformation. On the one hand, landlords and sometimes rich farmers were denounced and humiliated in one mass rally after another, meanwhile their property was confiscated and redistributed among the poor. On the other hand, impoverishment became the new symbolic power, as the poor, uprooted young men became the new leaders and major forces in various campaigns afterwards (Friedman, Pickowicz, & Selden, 1991).

In other words, the traditional “familial mode of social organization” (Yan, 2003) experienced serious challenges during Land Reform not only because the primary recourse - land - was taken away and reassigned, but also because the party-state replaced the previously local kinship-based communal power system with formal bureaucratic administrative system, and through which reached every peasant household in public and private life. Jing Jun (1998) describes this as two-step process: firstly the party-state liberated the family from the local informal communal power structure, and then for the first time in the Chinese history, exposed it directly under a formal modern administration system.

In this process, the landlords turned to be “despotic,” people’s traditional conceptions of authority were changed and imbued with a new set of class-related discourse. Since then, in the individual Chinese’s daily life, the moral vision of the Confucian order such as the “three cardinal guides and five constant virtues” have been taken place by the catch-phrases such as “class enemies,” “bad elements,” “five black

categories,”<sup>5</sup> “landlords and local tyrants” and so on. There were also other well-circulated slogans such as “Class struggle, the cure!” “There is great fun to fight against the heaven; there is great fun to fight against the earth; there is even greater fun to fight against the enemies!” “Loyal to Chairman Mao, loyal to the Party; Party is our birth parents, so if there is ever anyone who dares to take issue with the Party, let’s send the evil back to the tomb!” The individuals’ familiarity with and acceptance of this set of class-differential language directly caused the changes on individuals’ moral values and behavioral norms. Accordingly, the family-centered ideas and values, which had functioned for several thousand years, can no longer conduct and constrain individuals’ behaviors. Criticizing and denouncing the senior or once rich and powerful people in the local community and belaboring the whole traditionally authoritative system turned from extremely offensive and irreverent to be a common “progressive” behavior, which was conducted by the same group of people, who now were excitedly responding the call to engage directly with the “wheels of history.”

In other words, it seemed that the class discourse structured an entirely new social order in which class status determined not only personal access to any goods but also one’s entitlement to be the “included” or not. Even the nuclear family was powerless in front of this new set of criteria of inclusion or exclusion. In the era when class status decided all, lineage was just something could be utilized to break and show one’s political determination - as the popular saying back then put it: “It’s and only is your class that decides whom you should feel close with” (*Qin bu qin, jieji fen*). Under tremendous pressure, spouses and children frequently chose to place political interests over emotional attachments. It was common scene by then to see brothers turned against blood brothers, children against parents, spouse against spouse, etc. “Draw a line of demarcation” (making a clean break with family or certain family

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<sup>5</sup>It referred to the following five political identities in Mao’s China: Landlords, rich farmers, anti-revolutionists, bad-influencers, and right-wingers.



members) with his or her politically suspect relatives started from the 1951-1952's struggle against "three evils"<sup>6</sup> and "five evils"<sup>7</sup> and had three other sequent high tides in the following two and a half decades.<sup>8</sup> In a word, in those years, desperate people frequently drew this line with their blood relatives and actual family members in order to get the pass to the new society, new family. While, Anagnost (1997) contends that the principle of inclusion and exclusion revealed in the class discourse, "however authoritatively stated, are never completely successful" (p.4). Therefore, after Land Reform, in order to keep alert to the potential counter-attacks of the class enemies, protect the "fruits" of the revolution, and consolidate the peasants' and workers' republic, Mao's dictum, "Never forget class struggle," was brought up again and again in various representative forms.

#### **2.4.2.3 Class Struggle and National Consciousness in Representations**

It is during the Land Reform that the party-state invented a series of well-circulated images of feudal landlords and local tyrants such as "Zhou Bapi" and "Huang Shiren," as the concretion of the wicked old society. These representations centered on this basic narrative and were reworked in a vast array of different culture forms: revolutionary operas, exhibits, school textbooks, novels and films. Generally, the old society is simply the complete negation of everything the new society promised to deliver. The contrast between old and new was rendered absolutely black and white, evil and good. For example, in the well-known modern drama and film *The White-haired Girl*, the main narrative line is class struggle, which is actually the major theme of all socialist cinema, the spontaneous class consciousness of the

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<sup>6</sup>Within CCP, the struggle against corruption, waste and bureaucracy.

<sup>7</sup>In all cities, the struggle against capitalists who are violating the law by bribery, tax evasion, theft of state property, cheating on government contracts and stealing economic information.

<sup>8</sup>The other three high tides are respectively: 1) exposed, criticized and denounced "Hu Feng counter-revolution group;" 2) Against the conservative Right Wingers; and 3) Cultural Revolution.

peasants represented hardworking, integrity, and solidarity contrasts sharply with the hypocrisy and brutality of the landlord class from the very beginning.

Ann Anagnost (Anagnost, 1997) claims that the totalizing representations of the oppressiveness of the past are crucial, because only through this way it can be “annihilated again and again by the present” (p.38). More importantly, these representations forcefully changed the entire imaginary and symbolic orders, and had an undeniable ideological effect in the production of certain kind of political subjects long after the revolution was gone in the wind. In fact, till now, an education consisting of humiliation and hatred is still regarded as necessary. The Party keeps warning that any forgetting of this representational past may cause a “return of the nightmare.”

During the early years, we also see the clear efforts to build the nationalist consciousness through various representations. As early as on February 2, 1950, *People's Daily* published a long article featured praised a group of local villagers who promptly selected their best grain and excitedly made the delivery to local government as annual tax. The author commented, “It is because of the model laborers' exemplary effects that the peasants become aware of the importance of supporting the construction of a prosperous socialist country. They use this enthusiastic behavior to show their cordial love to the country, and to Chairman Mao.” Here is another piece from *People's Daily* (May 21, 1952), set in a first-personal narrative: “I was born in the mountainous area in the North Western part of Shanxi Province. For a rather long time, I thought that this remote, extremely poor, rural and under-resourced area has no ‘future’ to work for. Specifically, I thought that since there was no way to use tractors in this area, then there is no way to change the mountains into terraced fields, not to mention to develop the industry... Therefore, sometimes, I was even wondering can we eventually enter the socialist society. All these doubts ended when I read

the piece ‘Let the Communist Sunlight Cast on the Remote Village!’<sup>9</sup> I realized my horrible mistake. I am confident now that every remote hinterland in the new China, under the leadership of CCP and Chairman Mao, can march on the broad road and eventually enter the happy life.”

There was an all-time hit under the Maoist regime, allegedly adapted from “Lei Feng’s<sup>10</sup> Diary,” called “Sing My Favorite Folk Song to the Party,” which was promoted by Shanghai-based *Wenhui Bao*, and properly delivered the image the party-state wanted to construct in the people’s mind:

*“Sing my favorite folk song to the Party. I regard the Party as my mother. Actually mother only gave birth to me, while it is the Party who enlightens my whole spirit!”*

These representations are primarily pedagogical, conveying an officially approved model from above, but they do so as erupted spontaneously and autonomous from below. In other words, the rural masses were imaginatively positioned as the author as well as the object in a great progression toward socialism. In the process of merging the consciousness of the party with that of “the people,” the “people”’s republic was in making.

The new desire can also be found in the superior placement of national and party symbols. For example, the icons of Mao Zedong or Zhou Enlai, the latter was the first premier of PRC, had been displayed on private property, exactly the place used to hang the pictures or images of the ancestors or religious figures (Figure 2.1).

#### **2.4.2.4 The Changes “Within Family”**

##### **1. Love Affairs Went Political**

Under such circumstances, “love” between young couples can hardly be a purely e-

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<sup>9</sup>It was a review of a Soviet film called “Spring of the Village,” published earlier on People’s Daily.

<sup>10</sup>Lei Feng was a model soldier and Mao called the whole country to “learn from Comrade Li Feng” on March 5, 1963.



Figure 2.1. “The Happy Life Chairman Mao Grants Us”, 1954

motional, and often sentimental, personal matter. Actually, the CCP has a tradition inclined to criticize any “selfish,” individualistic bourgeois fantasy about love; instead, the Party insists that the people should put the social progress and nationalist cause in the higher position in the list of sources that may lead to personal fulfillment. By then, Ding Ling *et al.* (1950) promoted “revolutionary love,” trying to strike the proper balance, which called for young couples who share revolutionary outlooks and comparable levels of political sophistication, to join together fulfilling the responsibility to the society, and cultivate affection upon the foundation of working hard together for the people and socialist modernity.

Moreover, echoed the New Culture Movement and followed what applied earlier years under the Republican regime, the CCP actually used “freedom of marriage” as a tool to buffer familial control of junior or female members, and in turn make individuals more legible and accessible to the state. That is to say, legally, the state also sponsored ideological attacks on patriarchy and male dominance through promulgating the 1950’s Marriage Law, which had a direct impact on transforming the family institution and Chinese private life.

Actually, the first Basic Law the party-state issued is the marriage law, which was released on May 1, 1950. The Party presented the marriage and land reforms as two complementary revolutions that came hand in hand to dismantle the two pillars of the old order. Specifically, the marriage law officially abolished the feudal marriage system, and authorized the “neo-democratic marriage law” with the written codes like marriage freedom, monogamy, and gender equality. Susan Glosser (2003) described that the 1930s’ Marriage Law released by the Nationalists recommended the young couple to obtain their parents’ advice, approval and blessing before marrying, but it was not mentioned in the 1950’s new Marriage Law. Instead, it pointed out that if there was no emotional attachment left in the marriage, divorce should be encouraged, which was quite shocking new idea to Chinese peasants in particular.

In the meanwhile, it encouraged the reproduction and obligations to take care the aged. This new marriage law certainly had a direct influence in reconstructing people's intimate life experience, understanding and expectation. Particularly, as Susan Glosser (2003) commented that for the first time the CCP took the already widely recognized conjugal family out of its urban setting and introduced it in a compelling fashion to the peasants, as they were the champion of China's oppressed peasant youth.

Furthermore, in the traditional Chinese society, especially the rural part, marriage had never been a sole personal matter. Instead, it was beyond individual person and individual family, aiming at binding together several and even more families and secure their positions in the local community. Therefore, traditional marriage emphasized a lot on the young men's family backgrounds in the economic sense and their positions in the local society. While, till now, marriage no longer emphasized on traditional conditions of the alliances between families, but instead on the potential political status or class label one can obtain through it.

Another revealing moment was during the marriage ceremony: For centuries, weddings had been the family affairs conducted according to customs without any official intervention. Usually, in the traditional wedding ceremony, the young couple-to-be underscored their gratitude towards and the authority of the parents, ancestors, and the heaven and the earth (*tiandi*) in an order. Since the 1930s's cities, while further forcefully popularized nationwide after the Communists took power, the state has presented itself in the previously private ceremony, as an assigned civil servant acting as the witness and the official force that legitimates the marriage. In the process, the small hall has no seats for parents and no ancestors will be mentioned at all. With the absence of the seniors of the family, the state took over the traditional role. It is still in practice until today.

## **2. The Role Changing of "Family Members"**

***The “Women”*** In many cultural traditions, China included, male virtue meant participation in the public world of politics; female virtue meant withdrawal into the domesticity. A particularly interesting change happened after 1949 in the project of politicizing family - women were transformed from “a family person” to “a person of society and nation.” That is, a woman who once was imposed upon a role of family caretaker by the Confucian patriarchal culture, when the party-state tried to make the domestic realm disappear from the revolutionary vision, was normalized and mobilized as a social laborer for the socialist construction.

Moreover, while the Maoist revolution focused on the liberation of women’s social productivity, the femininity itself was suppressed, as later the domestic reproduction decisions were officially regulated by the state. In other words, gender discourse in socialist China was based on a de-feminization of women and their conformity with male standards regarding political sophistication (if not more “progressive”), hard work ethic, and plain dressing. Meng Yue (1993) argues, “to an extent, the heroine’s unsexed image is an empty because she is not a flesh-and-blood person but a political name” (p.133). Therefore, no matter the revolutionary girls in *Red Women Detachment* or the hard-worked woman peasant in *Li Shuangshuang* (1962), the women characters were constructed to serve this political name. Tani Barlow (1991) calls them “national woman,” whose liberation launched her as a political subject harnessed to the interests of the state. Their frequent dereliction of their domestic nurturing role was represented as equal to their dedication to the work for the revolutionary future.

***The “Fathers,” “Children” and the “Aged”*** The figure of the fathers was relatively effaced in this Maoist China, when the kinship hierarchy based on generational seniority and age was shattered. In almost all the representations, fathers were ambivalent and ambiguous. When they got explicitly represented, they were normally identified as the natural enemies of the new order. The absence of the

images of father can also be found when the revolutionary leaders talked about their childhoods. Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, He Long all spoke with great emotion about their mothers' impacts on them at a young age but hardly mentioned the influence of fathers.

But when the actual fatherhood called into question, the construction of a fantastic, national patriarchy was facilitated - Mao became a loving "father," a poet guarding Chinese cultural essence, and a victorious "strategist" who protected the country and restored its dignity. The blind worship of Mao as the infallible helmsman and an extraordinary father figure lasted until the end of 1970s. His god-like quality also confirmed by numerous giant Mao's statues erected across the country, concretizing the impulse toward greatness and immortalization.<sup>11</sup>

In the meantime, what was the proper place of children in this new family? Mao Zedong used to say that a blank paper is ideal to draw the newest and the most beautiful picture; In the middle of the break-up and rebuilding, children emerged as the iconic figures of the new society. There were plenty of images of young heroes represented as the model for the children of the new republic. In many stories, meaningfully, the heroic children tried to satisfy both "filial piety" toward their actual parents and "love of country," but in the end died for the latter.

Perhaps the most revealing source for the new unitary "father" figure and the emergence of interest in children was the revolutionary posters (Figure 2.2).

In the tension between father and children, one exception is the issue of care for the aged.

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<sup>11</sup>Nevertheless, Mao never expressively looked at himself as the national "father," but "the son of the people." The explicit "national father" in the official language is always Dr. Sun Yet-Sat, the founder of the Republican China after ended China's imperial history in the 1910s. It is in line with the CCP's claim of the radical anti-feudalism New Culture Movement as its legitimate source of origin.





**Figure 2.2.** “Report to Chairmen Mao”, 1971

As aforementioned, throughout the history of China, the state and the cultural elite regarded filial piety as a fundamental moral value and social norm. In the modern history, at every height of attacking the patriarchy system, there were always voices expressed concerns about how young people should balance their independence and obligations to take care of the aging parents. Indeed, as aforementioned, even under the radical socialism, elderly support was written in the 1950’s Marriage Law as a legal code. The Chinese Constitution also states explicitly that children have the full responsibility for taking care for their aging parents. Therefore, although the state indeed made the notion of filial piety less important in order to instead promote loyalty to the party-state, a fundamental change in the elderly support tradition was never the intention of the state. The advocacy to take care of the aged therefore still persisted.

Empirically, Zeng Yi (1986) reports that the average size of the Chinese family is much smaller than it was before the establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949, as the nuclear family has become the dominant family form and the extended family

with married brothers living together has become a rare phenomenon, but the three-generation family remains an important family formation in Chinese society. Liu Yin (1985, cited from Yi, 1986) also reports that a sizable majority of the “model families” selected by the local communities each year are three-generation families.

To sum up, Fei Xiaotong (1992 [1947]) once compared the Chinese family to its counterpart in Western societies and noted that in the West, “husband and wife are the central players around whom everything else moves, and the force that holds them together as a couple is their emotional attachment” (p.85). In contrast, he noted, the main axis of family relations in Chinese society is the vertical one between parents and children. I would argue that although the horizontal conjugal family relation between husband and wife was radically promoted during the various historical moments, it didn’t replace the latter as the central family relations in China. Or as Yunxiang Yan (2003) forcefully expounds, the difference is that the previously unprivileged members of the family: women and youth, began to acquire their own space and independence. Parish and Whyte (1978) also report from their empirical work that the most of time in the Maoist regime, the CCP seemed to favor the more traditional family structure, while trying to change the balance of power between senior and junior generations.

For me, Land Reform is one of the turning points of people’s conception of traditional family and clan, while by then, despite the CCP made bold moves to transform the society, the overall cultural expectations and social environment regarding the family did not change much; the private household remained due to its exclusive and protective nature, as even assigning class labels employed the household as the unit. In a word, the old one had not yet been completely wiped out and the new one was not fully conceived of either. It is until the high tide of radical collectivization which aimed at destroying any traditional patterns of social organization holding individuals back from the state, the attachment to single family diminished considerably.

## Collectivization: The Political Construction of The New Family

Land Reform triggered the re-organization of rural power structure and social landscape. Peasants were allocated a piece of land they wanted for a long time and seized the higher political status. Thereby, the party-state won the political support from the peasants in general. Also, perhaps more important, this reform leveled peasants' economic status. The preparation reduced the cost when the state started to promote Collectivization in the middle of the 1950s by stripping away the private property and important means of production the peasant families owed. In the meanwhile, when motivating the peasants to join in Land Reform and later Rural Cooperation, the party-state had launched a series of pedagogical projects to intentionally infuse the rural society with the nationalist ideology through various representations. After the patriarchy system and people's traditional conceptions of family started to shake, under such circumstances, the party-state started to build up a new socialist communal family.<sup>12</sup>

Concretely, in 1952, after Land Reform, the rural local cadres started to implement the "Decision on Agricultural Cooperation (draft)" earlier issued by the central government. Numerous agricultural cooperatives came into existence since then. Till December 1953, the central government released the final version of "Decision on Agricultural Cooperation." This "Decision" indicated that the primary task of the

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<sup>12</sup>The "socialist communal family" was originally used as the nickname of "Eastern Bloc" socialist countries, kind of an expression of the socialist internationalism. It was an idea drawn from "Brezhnev Doctrine," and in October 1961, at the 22nd Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev first used this expression. Later, Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev specified the connotation of this concept as a "voluntary alliance of socialist sovereignties," which included the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Romania, Vietnam, Laos, Mongolia and Cuba. CCP seized this expression, but this time the "socialist communal family" had different meaning in the Chinese context. The interlude called "we live in the socialist communal family" from the popular film titled "For the Sixty-one Class Brothers" (1960) is a good explanation of this expression's connotation in China, as its lyric goes: "In our socialist communal family, the billion people are united. All together we share the weal and woe. It is the closest family. If one is in need, all render help; if there is a disaster struck, help comes from everywhere. . . In our socialist communal family, the billion people are united. All together we share the weal and woe. It is the closest family."

local government was to unite the peasants and gradually materialize the socialist remolding of agriculture. This “Decision” pointed out the path of Chinese’s agricultural cooperation: from the small mutual-aid teams to semi-socialist agricultural cooperatives, and then moving to the advanced socialist agricultural cooperatives. Till July 1955, after criticizing the right-wing conservative approach, metaphorically so-called “women with bound feet,” there was a sudden surge towards agricultural cooperation. Some slogans of that time are still known to most of the Chinese, from which we can get a clear sense of urgency: “Spend fifteen years excelling UK and USA!” “Spend one day as twenty years; Running into Communism!” and “Enter Communism in two years!” Then till 1957, 90% households in the rural China had joined in the advanced socialist agricultural cooperatives.

From the small mutual-aid teams to semi-socialist agricultural cooperatives, and then the advanced socialist agricultural cooperatives, the land and other important means of production gradually changed from privately owned by individual peasants to collectively-owned by the collectives. Then after a series of minor changes, at the Tenth Plenary Session of the Eighth Central Committee on June 27, 1962, “Rules and Regulations on Rural People’s Communes (revised draft)” was announced, which decided that “the production team will be the basic unit for accounting, assume the sole responsibility for its profits or losses, and is direct in charge of organizing production and allocation” (Office of National Agricultural Committee, 1982, p.634). Till then, the so-called “three red flags” - the General Line, Great Leap Forward and People’s Communes - had all been launched.

The collectivization movement is unprecedented social reform regarding its range and depth. Or, as Yunxiang Yan (Yan, 2003) expounds that from Agricultural Cooperative to People’s Commune, CCP exerted the most thorough political reconstruction project in Chinese history. To a great extent, CCP realized its full control over rural society and resources and greatly increased the grip over the people - under the collec-

tivization, with the help of the 1958's Household Registration System, the peasants almost completely lost their mobility from the land. And the system of production brigades and sub-teams remolded the former families and local communities into production and working unites under the party-state's centralized administration and management (M. Wang, 1997). In other words, all the peasants entered the realm under the party-state's radar, and became potential members of the big socialist communal family in building. In the meantime, there was still individual family, but since the recourses were largely collectivized, these individual families lost many original functions. For example, some traditional customs and rituals were either denounced or fully prohibited, or had to perform in the only way CCP granted (Zhang, 1996).

#### **2.4.2.5 The Local Practices and Constraints**

Under the collectivization and Household Registration System, for about two decades, the individual peasant was required to obey the management of the collectives in the agricultural production, work cooperatively together, and enjoy the distribution according to their performances. Andrew Walder (1986) calls the peasants' new way of living "organized dependence," in which they had to depend on the collectives and the cadres to obtain their daily needs. In this case, the production brigade's head, treasurer and the like took the traditional role of senior men in the Confucian family or clan to make decisions about production and distribution. While, although in the newly formed collective "family," there was a set of strict "working-rewarding" system, the system itself was not faultless. As a result, on the one hand, the system kept functioning every day; on the other hand, the accompanying disputes never ended. It may be started since the labor division, or after harvest, regarding how to be fair in the actual process of distribution. For example, since lack of accurate quantified standards for good crops or bad ones, there were endless conflicts regarding: Who got the good batch while who had to accept the bad ones? Why ours

were always not as good as others'? Who made the call, according to what? etc. Not to mention, living together for a rather long time, there could be grudges or even feud between local large clans. Now, although the pressures of political and ideological directives from top-down constrained the public outburst of this kind of discontentment and it seemed that the people's commune functioned well and the party-state contained everyone within the constructed big family, the cracks and loopholes were actually embedded in the daily village life.

During the people's commune, the emergence of communal canteens is a wonderful case in point about the top-down motivation to build the unitary "family." In the eyes of anthropologists, eating behaviors are of importance. There is a whole set of cultural logics and behavioral norms about which family members could sit at which positions along the dinner table, as well as the food arrangement and placement on the table. To a great degree, it reflects family relations and family ideology. Since the communal canteens were set up, the set of logics was suspended. Instead, what people needed to do was just walked in the canteens, lined up in a queue, and then after got their food, found any place they like to finish it all alone or normally with fellow workers. It is striking because firstly it was the first time in history this type of canteen was introduced in peasants' life; secondly, in order to build the communal canteen, the villagers were forbidden to cook in their own home, which means after working together, they must eat together. Nevertheless, the communal canteen turned out literally "flash in the pan," which only existed for a rather short period of time (1958 -1961).

In the meantime, under the people's commune system, since all the land belonged to the collective, people worked together, and the rewarding system was based on the "work points" (*gong fen*). The counting of "work points" was primarily according to individuals' workload, and as long as one worked in the production brigade for the commune, he or she can earn his or her own work points, and eat at the communal

canteens at the expense of these points. In this sense, the preconditions in terms of economical income and structural space were ready for individuals to live independently without attaching to families. However, interestingly, during the collective era, although people earned their work points individually, officially the household remained the basic unit for redistribution.

#### **2.4.2.6 The Symbolic Violence and “Persuasion”**

This kind of radical transformation certainly was not without its violence. In Yu Shicun’s (2005) *Unusual Way*, it quoted Tian Jiaying, one of five Mao’s secretaries, once told a friend in 1961, “the peasant brothers are suffering. I know a family had to keep moving seven times during the Collectivization: since the village turned his house into the communal canteen, he moved to the local temple; then the temple was turned to a factory, so he had to temporarily moved from one relative’s to another. What followed is the whole village was required to combine and reorganize with other nearby villages, so he carried on few left items of all his belongings, keeping moving...” “It’s unbearable to just look into his situation.” Tian added (p.12).

However, strikingly, under Mao’s dictum of “politics in command” and “class struggle as the guiding principle,” local leaders seemed to explicitly rely on “persuasion” to motivate or constrain the peasants. This method mainly drew on threatening to political isolation, but during the radical years, the potential political isolation was closely connected to a fearful sense: there is no neutral being - “us” and “them” in the revolutionary politics only means brothers or enemies. In the meantime, throughout the socialist period, as Ann Anagnost (1997) points out that the local party secretary was the critical link between the universal discourse of the party-state and the particulars of local practice. His or her power to judge between what or who was “progressive” and was “reactionary” (there are only two categories available) was to

an extent like the thumb down or up to decide the fate of wounded gladiators in Roman history, therefore a powerful mechanism for control.

To sum up, I would argue that during this stage, although Land Reform and Collectivization generally achieved its goal, the state's reconstruction of the socialist communal family was still pending. The early stage of agricultural cooperatives (i.e., the small mutual-aid teams and semi-socialist agricultural cooperatives) was successful because those forms were largely congruent with Chinese cultural values and social psychology as both of them largely respected family ownership and had relatively small scale, which normally were limited within one village and the members of the teams of cooperatives were basically kindred or at least neighbors. This kind of cooperative mode therefore in nature was accorded with the logic of the "differential pattern of association" (Fei, 1992 [1947]). While, the advanced socialist agricultural cooperatives failed since they went far beyond the peasants' historically embedded understandings. In addition, there were the flaws within the organization and management of the people's commune itself.

After 1949, the party-state tried to break the "feudalistic" bondage of family and kinship on the individuals and make all qualified Chinese members of a nationwide socialist communal family. However, in fact, just as the trajectory of the people's commune suggested, although a set of the new understandings were shared by the people after a series of campaigns and movements, as the result there were changes happened on people's conceptions of family, this kind of rough, stormy, simplistic and superficial top-down practices cannot immediately and fundamental change people's ways of behavior as well as value system. Then came the Cultural Revolution, which is known as aiming at completely turning over the Chinese cultural tradition.

### **Cultural Revolution: The Complete Overturn of Traditional Family and the Materialize of the Socialist Communal Family**

"Sailing the seas depends on the helmsman, as revolutionizing China depends on the



Mao Zedong Thought!” “Follow Chairman Mao and forever revolutionize China! Follow Chairman Mao and turn the whole world into the communist red!” The Cultural Revolution was here, together with this type of slogans coming in an overwhelming manner. It said the goal of Cultural Revolution was to fully replace “feudal residual culture” and “capitalist culture” with proletarian culture. But Cultural Revolution was not only a radical cultural one, but also a frantic movement aiming at setting up a set of entirely new social orders. This vehement storm started from the cities in the early May 1966, and quite soon reached the rural area.

We know that the CCP always wanted to resolve the tension that family had created between the individual and the state. Through most of the Mao years, largely the government did not hesitate to smash the traditional family and instead call for individuals to join in the production and political life of the social communal family. But it is until the Cultural Revolution that we see the individuals fully subsumed into the state. At the height of Cultural Revolution, people eulogized CCP and Mao in lyric like “the size of sky and earth cannot excel our affection toward the Party; the feelings towards our own parents cannot excel our attachment to Chairman Mao!” There was no room left for the “selfish” private family, which was regarded as cannot do any good to the Communist modernity in perspective.

Specifically, Andrew G. Walder (1986) suggests that since the beginning, this party-state intended to govern the society through something similar to the military camp. All the mass-scale political campaigns aimed at turning the entire society into well-trained battle forces. Relevant evidence can be found in a letter written on August 31, 1944, Mao Zedong elaborated on three aspects of his plan for a family revolution. First, Mao stated: “It is necessary to destroy the peasant family; going to the factories and joining the army are part of the big destruction of the family.” Second, the key to reforming the peasant family is through mass campaigns: “The transformation of the peasant family from feudalism to democracy cannot be achieved

through isolated family members who read some sort of good suggestions from books or newspapers; instead, it can only be done through mass movements.” Third, he said, reforming the peasant family will help the development of individuality, because individuals will be organized into new forms of military, political, economic, and cultural organizations (Deng, 1994, p.188-91, cited from Yan, 2003, p.264). In a word, it required the people’s direct attachment to the state by dismissing any private forms of organizations that may block the state from laying its hands directly on individual Chinese and also may hinder individuals to directly attach to the state. Therefore, in Mao’s China, ideally, any industrial enterprises or collectives was primarily a social institution, then secondarily an economic one. They not only decided the fashions of social and political behaviors, but also defined personal relationships. Till the Cultural Revolution, the socialist communal family by then inherited the imagination and reconstruction during the period of people’s commune: Since the only way to obtain recourses was from the supervisors’ approval, family lost its supporting function for its family members as it had done for generations after generations; individuals had to depend on their cooperatives or, in the cities, working units (*danwei*), economically as well as socially and politically. In this set of dependent relations, individuals became tiny knots in an all-encompassing web from top-down; in the meantime, the party-state infused the ideology with great fanfare to encourage Chinese people to regard factories and collectives as their families, co-workers as family members. In other words, till Cultural Revolution, under the guidance of the totalitarian ideology and the centralization of most of the recourses, including the land, the family institution experienced the most severe damage in Chinese history. Accordingly, the traditional conceptions of family were wiped out after all those shock waves; the socialist communal family was materialized and reached its highly developed stage.

#### **2.4.2.7 The Ideological State Apparatuses and the Crucial Means of Propaganda**

During this period of time, besides the Big Character Posters, slogans, and images of Mao blotted out the sky and the land, the party-state also employed other forms to introduce new ideology into village life, which were suitable to the masses with lower levels of literacy:

##### **1. Loudspeaker**

Using loudspeakers to broadcast was the most important means that the party-state employed to disseminate ideological propaganda towards the rural area. For decades since PRC established, loudspeakers were ubiquitous in rural Chinese's daily life. It was cheap, effective and let "learning Chairman Mao's guidance in the same day as it is released." Individual peasants could not control either the content or the time of the broadcasting - the broadcasting stations were usually located at the county on the commune level where the propaganda crew decided what to broadcast and in which way; in the meantime, the peasants as receivers cannot choose to not listen the loudspeaker's broadcasting since there was no "on" or "off" switches on it. As a result, they were showered everyday with high-pitched official news, political scripts and speeches, policy education, and occasionally entertainment programs, regardless of their individual wishes. In this sense, for the first time in Chinese history, virtually ordinary people's life were not only within the reach of the state, but the "state" was everywhere in their life.

##### **2. Backyard Film**

In Mao's China, the socialist film as a power political tool which could effect cultural transformation and shape people's worldview, was part and parcel of the ideological state apparatuses, often operated in direct response to the Party's policy-making. Also, as a technological innovation by then, film industry immediately became a true

mass medium because it quickly reached a large number of population, especially the illiterate working class.

On the local level, usually, in order to show the peasants a film, firstly, the film projection team was invited from the county cultural bureau by the production brigade or local Party branch during the slack seasons. Then a portable generator was used to motivate the film projector, and films were often shown outside on a huge temporary screen hanging from two poles. It is therefore called “backyard film.” Normally, the whole village would come out to watch it as a ritualistic cultural event in those years. To be noted, by then, class struggle was the only theme of the most socialist films.

### **3. Propaganda Team**

In the meanwhile, a great number of propaganda teams were mobilized in those political or mass education campaigns to introduce new nationalistic and revolutionary values and ideas to the nationwide, both in the coastal areas and in the hinterland. Traditional folk art forms, such as folk songs, local operas, dances (*yangge*) and storytelling, were widely adopted by the teams. It was in accordance with the widely influential cultural policy articulated by Mao in his famous speech Talks at the *Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art* (May 1942) that there is a cultural army needed and actually indispensable for the Communist regime. In the rural area, for example, the team was belonged to the production brigade and its members were paid by the collectives with work points. The rustication (*xiafang*) policies of the late 1950s and later the Going-up-the Mountain-and-down-the-Countryside Movement prepared the countryside with a huge amount of educated minds, who became an integral part of this system of representations. The anthropologist based on UC Berkeley, Dr. Xin

Liu received his master's degree in 1990 with a thesis on Chinese hero stories, which according to him "made unexpected use of my time on the propaganda team."<sup>13</sup> <sup>14</sup>

Overall, the ideological results were significant: Through politicizing family, ritualizing daily life and materializing tons of political symbols, the party-state virtually reconstructed the local society. Gradually, the party-state's exhortation from being suspected or watched from distance, till now the local community was willing to accept, dominated by and internalized it. Partly as the result, till today the discourses and practices of the ordinary Chinese people, even from a remote village, always reflected the direct impact of the nationalistic and revolutionary values and ideas, one way or the other.

### **2.4.3 The Plan for the Cities**

#### **Introduction**

After the establishment of PRC, there was a three-year period of economic recovery in the cities. Then till 1952, the national economy was tremendously improved, for example, the industrial production excelled the best level in the history, although by then China was still an overwhelmingly agrarian country and the amount of per capita of industrial products was still far behind the advanced capitalists. As we know that central planning was an important character of socialism, as egalitarianism was the basic principle. In order to build up socialism with a clear blueprint, the Chinese government conceived of the first five-year plan. It is the beginning of China's planned economy.

When there is a certain economic order, there would accordingly be a certain working ethic. The planned economy required the corresponding collective working

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<sup>13</sup>Personal correspondence.

<sup>14</sup>Between the political or mass education campaigns, especially during the festivals, the propaganda teams also provided free entertainment.

ethic. In the name of progression of socialism, to reach the ultimate goal of Communism and “the distribution according to need,” it was reiterated that, the happiness and welfare of the individual Chinese people and the development of society are one and the same; In order to realize the fantasy of the Utopian future, the party-state asked the workers to subordinate their needs and desires, rights and interests, to the greater good, with every piece of his or her “light and heat.” It has been expressed in the slogans like “Produce first, then live a better life!” There is nothing they cannot come over because “Suffered? Just recall the 6000-mile historic journey of Long March; Tired? Try to think about what the revolutionary predecessors did for us” and “Rather die because of making a step of progress, not live by half-step back off!” The core of collective working ethic is to require the individuals to fully subject himself or herself to the party-state’s economic order, no matter under what situations but “I am a piece of brick, so where the revolutionary construction needs where I am willing to be removed to!”

In line with the working ethic, in the cities the new republic initiated a development framework of “industrialization with minimal urbanization” (Naughton, 1995). In other words, the city of the new republic was configured for maximum productivity, minimum consumption. Specifically, on the blueprint of Chinese socialist construction, on the one hand, the Household Registration System successfully restricted mobility from countryside to cities to avoid the growth of any urban centers; on the other hand, in the cities, uniformed, standardized, and self-sufficient production compounds were in charge of working, housing, leisure, shopping, childcare, etc. all the aspects of the workers’ life. The unique phenomenon was expressed as “work units run the society (*danwei ban shehui*).

### **Danwei, the New “Family” in Chinese Cities**

To understand life and space in the cities during the Maoist era, we must look very

close to the work unit (*danwei*), which emerged as the most powerful and all-inclusive social unit of the daily life for Chinese lived in the Mao's cities.

In my point of view, *danwei* was the city's mirror image of the original clan in the rural China. There were plenty of similarities between the clan and the *danwei*. For example, both of them had relatively stable members and clear hierarchical relations; and both of them were not merely a working, production unit but carried on rich social functions. For Chinese who lived through the planned economy in the cities, *danwei* was the "family." As explicitly revealed in the behaviors like whenever there were conflict within the neighborhood (in this case, also the co-workers) or even domestic disputes, the conflicting parties "naturally" turned to the leaders of the *danwei* for mediation; Also, whenever the young workers planned to get married or have babies, they must obtain the official permissions from the *danwei*; even when people need to travel for no matter personal or business-related reasons, in order to get any forms of accommodations outside his or her immediate work unit, they need to carry the introduction letter (*jieshao xin*) issued by *danwei*. Also, working in the *danwei*, under the traditional, state-ownership system, was usually referred as an "iron rice bowl" and guaranteed life-long employment and benefits - even in many cases, one of the kids of the old workers can inherit his or her parents' job after their retirement.

For individuals lived and worked in those relatively big *danwei*, this compound could be the whole "society" they knew about: daycare, kindergarten, primary school, middle school, canteen, bathhouse, grocery stores, workers' club, stadium, library, hospital, police station, etc. Like in the eyes of the peasants born in the agrarian age the village was their whole society, the *danwei* functioned in the same way.

Therefore, as you can see, *danwei* was much more than merely a place of employment. It carried on complex social relations as well as multiple social functions; as a marker of identity, it evoked a strong sense of belonging.<sup>15</sup>

In addition, *danwei* employed a dual power structure: one was the Communist Party branch committee, which was in charge of any social and ideological related functions; and the other was the administrative team, which was in charge of production. The latter followed the lead of the Party branch. *danwei*, in this sense, without a doubt, played a crucial role in the extraordinary party-state surveillance and social control over the Chinese lived in the cities.<sup>16</sup>

## 2.5 Conclusion and Discussion

The Communist regime established since 1949 had tried to remodel a totalitarian society through equalitarianism and collectivization. Coining the “socialist communal family” was the political imaginary along with this construction. That is, it was carried out under a larger nation building and reconstruction agenda and operated within the state discourse. It is said that this re-imagination is derived from New Culture Movement’s aspirations for the modern family and state. To be specific, the aim was to free individual people from their natural family, to put them as separate knots on the top-down state control chains, in other words, transfer individuals’ emotional attachment and loyalty from the family to the state to consolidate its absolute power and authority. Through launching a series of large-scale political and mass education campaigns, the traditional family relations and family ideology were both seriously challenged, and new discourses and practices were invented. Through

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<sup>15</sup>Although in China, nowadays, people still frequently use “*danwei*” to indicate their working place, but since it lost almost all the social roles, it is not a *danwei* in the original sense.

<sup>16</sup>For those few residents in the cities who did not have a *danwei* by then, as *wuye youmin* (unemployed vagrants), the loose knot of the socialist web, they surely would look suspicious and draw attention from other surveillance sensors of the party-state.



reviewing the changes regarding family during different time periods before and after 1949, with especially attention paid to the rural area under the first thirty years of radical socialism, I am intended to reveal the whole picture of this kind of state intrusion and the fundamental changes in the social textures and fabrics in relation to the vicissitudes of family.

### **2.5.1 The Purpose of the State: The “Legible” Society**

Sociologist and Anthropologist James C. Scott (1998) claims the modern nation-state “attempts with varying success to create a terrain and a population with precisely those standardized characteristics that will be easiest to monitor, count, assess, and manage” (p.81-82). He continues to emphasize that their leaders “do not merely describe, observe, and map; they strive to shape a people and landscape that will fit their techniques of observation” (ibid, p.82).

This insistence on “legibility” is helpful in understanding the various practices the totalitarian regime motivated to get access to the individual. For example, the collectivization and Household Registration System in the rural China and the work unit compounds in the cities were both basically means of population registers and prime examples of the state making the society “be centrally recorded and monitored” (ibid, p.2). Further look into its material and discursive practices in the rural China: Land Reform completely overturned the land tenure customs and reorganized people on a standard grid outlined by different class status; people were also forced to organize their lives more “legible” for the state: wedding ceremony was required to be “open” and led by the civil servant instead of seniors in the family; even the naming customs which traditionally were used to indicate the bloodlines and family expectations were changed: In the Cultural Revolution, for example, millions of Chinese named their children “*weidong*” (protect the East), “*Weihong*” (protect the CCP), “*Weige*” (protect the Cultural Revolution) or others with similar explicit political meanings.

I think that this new routine of “*naming*” revealed a critical moment in the Chinese political culture that the state had the absolute power to define the subjects.

The fundamental structural step, I will argue, was to remove the intermediate strata in the society that may block the state from “seeing” the individual people directly: in the traditional Chinese society, there was the local gentry system, composed of the elites from local clans, playing an important part in the traditional informal power structure as the “third realm” between the imperial government and the ordinary people. The gentry class was embedded in the local community, tightened with the traditional symbols and meanings and formed what Prasenjit Duara (1988) calls “cultural influx of power.” Specifically, although standing outside the state formal governing framework, the gentry class was the crucial force that consolidated the framework; in the local society, the gentry class was also the crucial in forming the bottom-up, organic social organizations, and strengthening self-organization and regulation. In traditional Chinese society, there was the unwritten rule about “the imperial power should not intrude below the county level” (*Huangquan bu xiexiang*), because the local populace can be well managed by the local force, and the state can instead efficiently exert taxes and other resources from the grass-root with the help of the gentry. Maurice Freedman (1958) considered them naturally both the local representatives and the state instruments. Richard Davis (1986) explicates that “through large landholdings, political alliances, and social ties, the larger social elite was able, in an almost conspiratorial fashion, to dominate the local scene for centuries, while effectively excluding outsiders from its closely knit circle” (p.xiii). However, since 1949, the gentry class was completely wiped out as the local elites were labeled as “landlords” and evicted from the new “family.” The official bureaucracy from the top down fully took over the control of the rural society. It is the fundamental structural change after 1949 and has far-reaching influence till now.

### 2.5.2 “Public Life” as A By-product and Its Trajectory

In many cases, the Communists’ efforts on opening the family for the state’s watchful eyes provided individual peasant with new freedom. In other words, by shifting one’s loyalty from toward the individual family to the socialist collectives, as Yunxiang Yan (2003) expounds that new social conditions and space were created for the development of individual identity. But he also calls for attention that the intention of the CCP leaders was not to cultivate independent individual peasant in the first place, as any form of participation in public life was always strictly controlled by the party-state. In a word, the relative independence and freedom the rural youth obtained was largely from the top-down initiatives, rather than a bottom-up, spontaneous pursuit in which individuals fight for their own rights. In this discussion, Yan gave out a convincing example about the young women in Mao’s era who were mobilized by the state to participate in production and politics during the heyday of radical socialism: but they mostly grew up in the rural environment, illiterate and never heard of “women liberation” or “gender equality” before, so they themselves don’t have a clear gender perspective, not to mention were motivated by it to pursue their own goals.

However, although it came from the heavy political influence and walked hand in hand with the loss of a “natural or organic” order deeply rooted in traditional community, Yan (2003) argues that rural Chinese for the first time in the history were sort of able to enjoy a new “public” life created by the collectives on behalf of the state. In other words, by imagining a “*shehui*” (society) and “*renmin zhengfu*” (People’s government) outside the traditional family-centered feudal order, people now can interact with others beyond the linkage networks, disregard the Confucian hierarchies and work for the larger good. While, the de-collectivization and withdraw of the party-state that started in the early 1980s therefore also created “a social

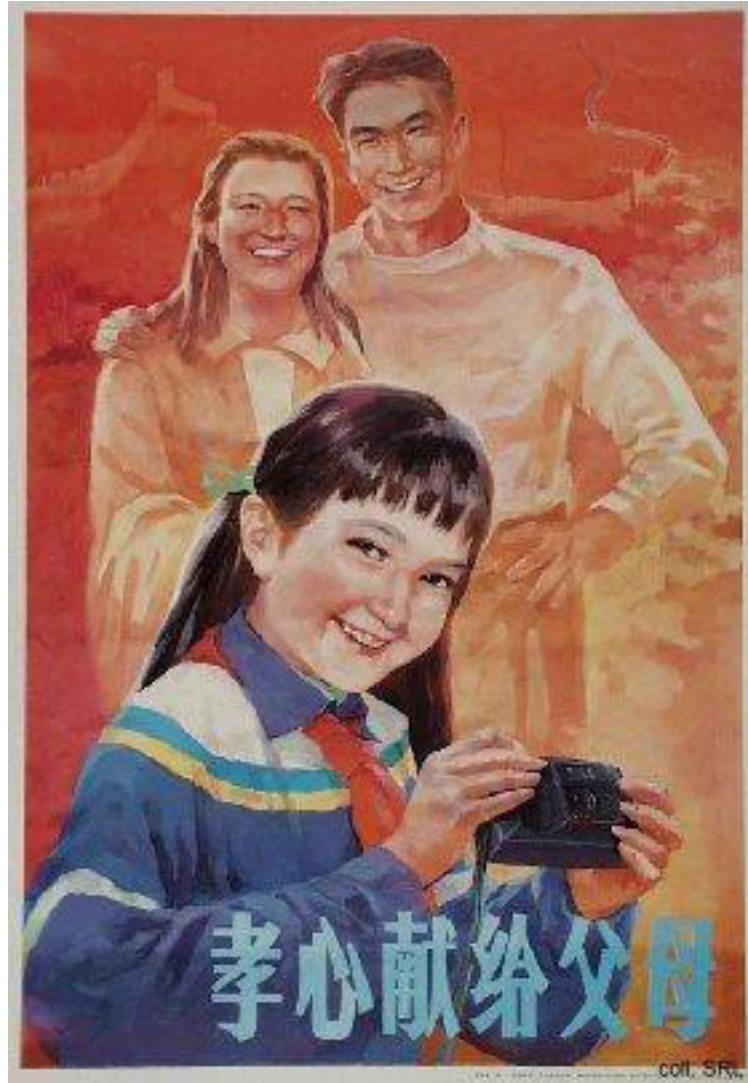
vacuum of moral values and behavioral norms that was soon to be filled by sweeping consumerism and other values of utilitarian individualism,” Yan laments (2003, p.16).

Is it still the same situation nowadays? Or is it again changed because of the economic development, new population mobility and the wide access of new social technologies? In this dissertation, I am eager to look for the possibility of growing a new organic, bottom-up “public” other than the state-sponsored one. The relevant discussion mainly locates in Chapter 5.

### **2.5.3 The End of Collectivism and the New Family Ideal**

Since the opening up and economic reforms in the late 1970s and early 1980s, collectivism fell apart. Since 1984, China officially entered the post-collectivization period. The collective morality had been lingered for a while, but time passed by and the memory slowly faded away, together with the working-together and distributing-equally “socialist communal family.”

Since the de-collectivization, the private home has been rehabilitated. In the 1980s, we see once again as the counterpart in the 1910s, Chinese intellectuals publicly pursued, debated, celebrated individual freedom, romantic love and privatized interior space, which played an important role in remapping the intersections of self, family, society and state, and fundamentally as Hui Xiao (2009) powerfully argues that it is a set of intellectuals’ tactics of resistance. Since 1992, the pace of China’s reform has been dramatically accelerated. Though its one-party political system remains largely intact, China has been radically neoliberalizing. In the meanwhile, we see the rise of another wave of conjugal family narratives. In Figure 2.3, although in the background we still see the nationalist touch as the Great Wall usually was used to represent the defensive role of the nation-state, it directly calls “show your filial piety to your parents,” which is far different from the policy in the Maoist years which aimed at directing the filial piety within the family to the loyalty toward the



**Figure 2.3.** “Show your filial piety to your parents”, 1998

party-state. More importantly, nowadays, responding to the campaigns related to the ideology of “harmonious society”, the media organizations reinvent new individualities, prioritize the maintenance of a proper and stable domestic order, based on a set of neoconservative values, to divert people’s attention from increasing social disparities and conflicts as appeared on economic gains and commodity consumption. As a result, an emerging discourse of interiority with fissures and contradictions starts to take shape.

The detailed material and discursive transformations in this regard will be discussed in Chapter 3.

## CHAPTER 3

### MATERIAL AND DISCURSIVE POST-MAO TRANSFORMATIONS

*... the pulling forces of politics and economics have changed the internal and external configuration of a party newspaper toward what I call a "Party Publicity Inc." ... unlike the old propaganda instrument served by the party press for decades, the new "Inc." is oriented more toward promoting the image of the party and justifying its legitimacy than toward ideological brainwashing and conversion.*

—Zhou He (2000a, pp. 143-144)

#### 3.1 Preamble

Since the “open and reform” policy was adapted by the Chinese party-state in the late 1970s, the egalitarian policies marked the Maoist era faded away. The modernization ideology of the pragmatic Dengist state showed radically new ways to various aspects of life. For one, Chinese population has regained their mobility with the deterioration of work units in the city and the corrosion of the collectives in the countryside, which is exerting its significant influence on Chinese social structure, Chinese people’s intimate life details and also the symbolic world.

I am going to address five general questions in this chapter: 1) How were the “open and reform” policies initiated and sped up in China before and after 1989’s Tiananmen crackdown? 2) How have these changes further led ideological transformation as well as affected cultural production? 3) What are the influences cast on ordinary people’s life, materially and discursively? 4) What consequences have resulted from the mass media industry reform? What are the changes of the ruling techniques on

the cultural activities? Particularly, now how is the “super family” appearing in the public discourse space? 5) What is the economic, political and cultural background for the production and promotion of CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala? A historical survey of the changing political culture may offer insights to look into this particular media spectacle of interest.

## **3.2 The “Open and Reform” Policies Before and After 1989**

Cultural Revolution left China a severe crisis of the faith on power and authority. Scholars and observers coined the phenomenon as “three crises of faith,” (*sanxin wei-ji*) including crises on socialism, on the party-state and on the future. Although the central government denied the existence of this set of crises in every official arena, it was frequently mentioned and reminded in the CCP members’ political study groups and the party journals like *Red Flag* (later changed the name to *Pursuing the Truth*), and *Internal Reference*, iterating “improving the working style of the party-state is the matter of life and death for the CCP!” From the late-1970s to the early-1980s, immediately reacting to and recovering from these crises became the momentum of construction for the generation of Chinese leadership after Mao. To be specific, in order to regain people’s confidence, it impelled the party-state to re-tone the ideological engine, reform the economy, as well as reset the relations between the party-state and “the masses” (Duara, 1996; Spence, 1999; Tsou, 2002).

### **3.2.1 The “New Era”**

#### **The “Open and Reform” Policies in the New Era**

The landmark meeting of the Third Plenum of the eleventh CCP Central Committee was convened in Beijing in the end of 1978. This convention is a significant turning point in CCP’s history of governance. The pragmatic Deng Xiaoping ascended to power, Mao’s thoughts of class struggle and continuous cultural revolutions were



officially given up, and the party-state shifted its “focus of work” to opening up and economic development. Tang Tsou (2002) commented that it is historical not only because it is the paradigmatic change from the revolutionary storms and turbulences that had lasted for over three quarters of the 20th century, but also is a break from the basic trend of Chinese top-down political fashion to reach the minds and hearts of every single Chinese ever since the New Culture movement. In 1984, the Third Plenum of the 12th CCP Central Committee further decided to let the market play a major role in developing the national economy. A “socialist planned commodity economy” took the place of the previous “socialist planned economy.”

The period of time from 1978 to 1989 is called the “New Era” (*xin shiqi*). During this period of time, the West was reintroduced into the ordinary Chinese people’s life, after the past three decades’ isolation from the outside. Science and technology, once again, were highly promoted in official slogans and other representational ways. In the economic sphere, “the production responsibility system (*i.e.*, private farming and individual responsibility) was promoted in the countryside, associated with the rise of individual enterprises in the city; in the meantime, in the coast area, special economic zones were opened up one after another.

During Mao’s era, individualism was labeled as equal to selfishness and possessiveness, and was regarded as the characteristic of the petty bourgeoisie. While, till now, the economic reform is clearly designed to recognize individual efforts and appeal to the self-interest of single household. Through linking income with the quantity and quality of work, now workers and farmers were truly motivated to boost their productivities. A strong wave of self-awareness emerged among the Chinese people during this time, as Ann Anagnost (1997) reports “Following your own path” became a popular motto right at that time.

### **The Further Ideological Transformation and “Liberation of Thoughts”**

In the political sphere, the party-state was gradually decentralizing its power and

loosening its rigid control of speech and publications, resulting in a period known as “liberation of thoughts.” As a result, thousands of intellectuals had been denounced in Mao’s years were rehabilitated and their works were released or republished. In the meantime, educated youth returned to the city after being sent down to the countryside for many years and they joined in the seek of moral and spiritual healing, recovery and redemption. The public discourse sphere was then filled with the voices of “the wounded,” “retrospection” and “roots-searching.” “Family” and “home,” once again, were rediscovered and reimagined, this time as the site in which the humanity and conscience was re-found, interrogated and reaffirmed. The case of literature on divorce in the name of love and humanity is a particularly telling example (Xiao, 2009) in this blossoming literary genre generally called “Scar Literature.” A nationwide “Great Cultural Discussion,” popularly known as “Cultural Fever” (1985-1989) also swept over the country.

Moreover under the Maoist regime, when Madam Mao was in charge of the production of literature and art, a cultural policy emphasized “three prominences” (*santuchu*) was the guideline for all the relevant production, which include “1) giving prominence to positive characters among all the characters, 2) to heroes among the positive characters, and 3) to the leading hero among the heroes.” Now, in order to eliminate this clearly “class” connoted narrative, many writers, journalists, filmmakers and the like tried to depict the revolutionary history from new perspectives. It is thus also a time known for its anti-heroic acts. For one, as Yi-Tsi Feuerwerker (1998) analyzes, the then Nobel Laureate in Literature Mo Yan kept providing political allegories through the portrayal of the “disfigured, deformed, physically maimed, mentally retarded, sexually impotent” (p.212) rural peasants in the post-revolutionary era, seeks to deconstruct the revolutionary peasant icons which was the “vanguard” in both the party-state’s practice and ideology. I think the popular songs (*liuxinggequ*), which were once rejected as the music of “bourgeois spiritual pollution,” now

were also telling examples for this change that “small” took the place of “big” and “grand.” It suggested by the titles of then-biggest hits, for example, “*Xiao Cao*” (I am a little-noticed grass), or “*Alibaba*” (Alibaba is a carefree, happy youngster). In the film industry, instead of presenting the panoramic picture of war, stories frequently focus on the persistence of human feelings and blood-ties during the catastrophic years: *Xiaohua* (A Little Flower, 1979) tells a touching story about two girls both named “*Xiao Hua*” looking for separated relatives and love in the tempestuous years of the 1930s. It clearly celebrated the humanist reunion of the “small family” and received favorable response among the audience. Another popular film *Xiaojie* (The Small Street, 1981) poetically represented the persistent bonding between two lovers against all the traumatic experiences they suffered during the ten-year catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution. It is clearly worth noting that three of the four aforementioned then-most-popular songs or films include “*Xiao*” (small, simply, low-key) in their titles. Faced with this unintended “cultural pluralism,” the party-state tried hard to retain ideological control over the public media and promote it through state-sponsored cultural events. In 1983, that CCTV started to stage Spring Festival Gala is a good case in point.

As the “open and reform” policy went deeper in the mid-1980s, it witnessed, as partly revealed in the “Great Discussion,” a subtle but profound shift on Chinese people’s ideological imaginaries: on the one hand, it was a time filled with eloquent expressions of national jubilation and optimism towards national revival, while, on the other hand, it was a time of spiritual crisis and cultural anxiety. Specifically, on the one hand, the undergoing economic, political and ideological reforms were all on the fast tracks by then, which have given rise to an illusion that China’s century-long dream for national modernity can be finally achieved. On the other hand, since the late 1980s, the belated “modernity” triggered new waves of discussions across the country: since there was “nothing wrong” with the Confucian cultural tradition as it

was believed that new Confucianism brought the rise of capitalist “four little dragons” (*si xiaolong*) in East Asia,<sup>1</sup> the problems intrinsically buffered China’s development were regarded as coming from the political system (Link, 1993). Corruption was one of the obvious targets.

However, this optimistic dream and spiritual reflection were both shattered by the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown, although the pro-democracy movement has made the general public’s cry for liberalization and democracy heard in every corner of the world and has been acclaimed all over the globe. As part of its global influence of the crackdown, the socialism system clasped in Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries, which marked the end of the Cold War and the advent of globalization. In China, the faith in the Communist ideology was virtually bankrupted, since then socialist China entered into the post-socialist era.

### **3.2.2 1989 Onwards**

Post-1989 China has been facing one of the most important periods of change in the history of the CCP’s governance. In the first several years after 1989, under the Jiang Zemin administration, China’s high politics was re-oriented to an obvious conservative standpoint. In spring 1992, Deng Xiaoping’s inspection tour to Southern China revitalized the suspended economic reform. Under the new-fashioned pragmatic guidance that “no matter it is a white cat or black one, the cat that can catch rats is the good one,” China sped up the invitation to the market into Chinese society. In 1993, the Third Plenum of the 14th CCP Central Committee the issued “The Decision on Economic Reform,” announcing that the objective of the reform was to create a “socialist market economy” (better known as “socialism with Chinese characteristics”). It gave up the previous “socialist planned commodity economy,” while

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<sup>1</sup>The “four little dragons” include Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan, all of which were deeply influenced by Confucianism.

instead, emphasized that in the process of constructing the socialist market economy, the party-state is changing from fully control of all the resources in the society with periodical macro plans and other administrative means to gradually and initiatively relaxing the control, in order to let the market finally play the leading role.

### **The Rise of Consumer Culture**

Consequently, one eye-catching transformation in the Chinese society in the 1990s was the rapid shift of the focus from production to consumption. In the socialist era, as discussed in Chapter 2, the party-state emphasized maximum production and minimum consumption. In the age of market economy, the Chinese party-state finally realized that the production can only be sustained by a constant demand for products. That is, after decades of deprivation of material consumption due to heavenly disasters and human calamities (*tianzai renhuo*) and the cult of austerity imposed officially by the party-state, a new cult of materialism and consumption has finally risen, which also happened in a time marked by a vast ideological and moral vacuum to be filled after the Tiananmen crackdown. One telling case is that since 1999, the Chinese government has decided to give the workers seven day “long holiday” after May 1st (labor’s day) and October 1 (national day), in order to encourage shopping and travelling. It is clearly conflicting with the working ethic under the radical socialist era.

A society solely emphasizing material satisfaction - *xiaokang* - was officially recognized in 1997 as the mid-range goal of the reform, and the possibilities of “*xiaokang*” lifestyle since then have been excitedly imagined and pictured in television programs and commercials. Zha Jianying (1996) points out that the hidden text of the state-promoted economic frenzy in the post-1989 China is “I rule, you prosper, and let’s forget all else” (p.13). As she explains, as far as the Party is still running the country, and the country is still enjoying a boom, memories of the past tragedies will be quickly eroded. While, Bin Zhao (1998) argues that the rampant consumerism and

extreme materialism led by economic frenzy are symptoms of rather than solutions to the ideological and moral vacuum.

### **In Search of A New Unifying Ideology**

In the ideological sphere, besides witnessing further commodification of cultural production, the third generation of Chinese leadership had made every effort to regain its legitimacy and find out a new unifying ideology. Succeeding Deng Xiaoping, President Jiang Zeming constantly reminded the CCP members of the crucial importance of ideological control after the 1989's Tian'anmen. As a result, the "Patriotic Education" campaign was launched in late 1994 by the central government in order to promote young men's affection toward the "mother-father country," but Bin Zhao (1998) believes that it has "little visible effect" (p.53).

It coincided the time that the government-sponsored CCTV's Spring Festival Gala has been vigorously promoted. That is, along with other cultural traditions once practiced across the country, the "lost" Spring Festival tradition has been selectively reinvented by the party-state, and incorporated into its nationalistic discourses and mass media system. Surprisingly, such an orchestrated performance on Chinese New Year's eve on CCTV's stage has been warmly welcomed by ordinary Chinese people who showed a deep sense of ideological apathy since the spring of 1989.

Succeeding Jiang from 2002, Hu Jintao became the center of the fourth generation leadership of the PRC. In the sixteenth CCP Central Committee Conference in 2004, Hu officially proposed his most important social, political and economic objective: to establish "*hexie shehui*" (Harmonious Society) which, according to him, can be achieved through a rehabilitation of the traditional family ethics (further by revisiting Confucian canons and emphasizing the ethical education). Among many other intriguing implications, it is clearly an ideological rupture with the Maoist "class struggle."

### 3.3 The New Order of Social Life in the Post-Collective China

In the past decades, China quickly and widely opened its door, moved from an autarkic command economy to become a major player in global economy. Under the profound economic and social transformations, the social structure changed quickly, the same as people's moral values and behavioral norms.

As discussed in the previous chapter, under the radical socialism from the 1950s to the 1970s, the state-sponsored attack on all those institutional bases of parental authority in the individual family, upon which the socialist communal family was built up. Now, on the background of the rapid withdrawal of the state from the social life, and the accelerated market-oriented reforms, where is the socialist communal family heading to?

#### 3.3.1 In the Cities: The Decline of Work Unit

Since the economic reform started, the relationship between the workers and their work unit (*danwei*) has become much loosened. For a short period of time around the late 1980s and early 1990s, many people left their *danwei* and looked for new opportunities along the south coastline area. During that time, interestingly, as long as the *danwei*'s policies allowed (most of them did), these men were willing to pay their old *danwei* on a regular basis to keep their old "membership" within that actually declining "family."

Till the 1990s, many state-owned enterprises started the painful privatization and reorganization. The "iron rice bowl" was broken, same as the used guarantee of lifetime employment. Millions of people who worked in state-owned enterprises became so-called *xiagang* (off-post) workers. After two years of being off post, *xiagang* workers would be officially laid off. Around that time, there was almost no systematic welfare system ready for them; they can only collect very meager unemployment sub-

sidy from their old *danwei* for two years. As a result, the state-owned work unit became much less authoritative as well as less intrusive in today's Chinese people's city life; the people also became much less attached to their work units, let alone loyal to them.

Moreover, during the Maoist period, we have known from the discussion in Chapter 2 that in the city, not only the choice of work but the choice of place to live, were designated by the party-state. With the *danwei* system fell apart, a comprehensive housing reform was initiated in 1996, as in the meantime the central government also realized that the private home ownership could be a significant boost of consumption and thus economic growth. In other words, instead of being allocated as indispensable benefits from *danwei*, now houses are sold in the open real estate market to any individuals who can pay the price. This change further decreases the authority and former dominance of *danwei* as a major social control mechanism of the party-state. As a result, the old collective "family" image in the city during the Maoist era virtually disappeared in the wind.

### **3.3.2 In the Villages: The Collectives Clasped**

Since 1984, rural China entered the post-collectivism period. Collectives were dismissed overnight and most of the collective property was privatized. The fundamental means of production - farmland - was again divided. Like the political campaigns for collectivization in the 1950s, the decollectivization once again implemented with compelling force from above, regardless of local hesitations and reservations, and changed the order of social life to a great extent (Yan, 2003). Generally, there were plenty of confusion, alienation, and disappointment among the peasants.

In the meantime, as part of the result of decollectivization, people were left no choice but to retreat to their own private homes and have grown increasingly cyni-



cal about any grand moral discourse.<sup>2</sup> In terms of the ideological state apparatuses, the loudspeaker quickly disappeared in the postcollective era, and other home-owned entertainment gadgets have taken its place, such as radio and later television. The information and images of the city and even foreign life through those channels powerfully reconstruct the peasants' imagination about the new life. At that time, when there was few entertainment shows on the little screen, CCTV's Spring Festival Gala arrived just on time, well prepared for "all the offspring of dragon."

Another telling case on the post-collectivism change on social order is the rise of domestic migrant workers from the countryside to the cities. Since the "home" is no longer homey but only the place from which the ambitious village young men launch their escape into the "modern" life where they get to know from the "magic box" television, more and more villagers began regularly seeking employment outside the village community, often in cities hundreds of miles away. However, after thirty years of rural-urban separation and the development of large economic and social gaps, villagers frequently encountered urban prejudices and stereotyping against them:

### **3.3.3 The "Invisible," "Floating" Population from the Rural Area to the Cities**

One of the most striking structural changes in contemporary China is perhaps the emergence of the so-called "floating population" (*liudong renkou*). Most of them are peasant laborers from the rural area who traverse the distance from the impoverished periphery to the more prosperous coastal provinces. They have made the transition from agricultural to cheap and docile industrial labor, "a transition that is perhaps unprecedented in world history in its sheer magnitude and speed" (Anagnost, 1997,

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<sup>2</sup>Yunxiang Yan (2003)'s village cadre informant told him that after decollectivization "doing thought work" was no longer effective and people no longer respected the authority of cadres.

p.77), and has supplied an important motor for China's astounding economic takeoff in the last decade.

The then-president of the Chinese Sociological Association, anthropologist and sociologist, Lu Xueyi (2002) expounds that, first of all, the migrant workers have become an important new component of China's "working class," and the labor of migrant workers is the engine of China's economic miracle in the past decade. But in all the elements that have often been credited for China's development, Lu continues, few recognize the other side: the plight and social marginalization of those migrant workers. According to Lu, the reason that they have been excluded from sharing wealth and prosperity is because they are "invisible" force, having no "named" position in this stark structure, and fundamentally because of the limit of what Lu dubs "one-country, two-*policies*" - the policy on opening up and economic reform in the city as opposite to the continuous constraint of the Household Registration System, known as "*hukou*" policy. Indeed, it is this "*hukou*" policy that institutionalizes the urban marginality of the majority Chinese who were not born in the cities. The assumption behind of this policy when it was conceived of in the 1950s was that "out-of-place" meant "out-of-control;" this assumption clearly still functions as this system continues to play a stark role to divide Chinese with the old notions of "urban" and "rural," despite the reality of the arrival of hundreds of millions of peasants in the cities. It means for the migrant workers, after entering the cities for years, even decades, most of them are still living in a prolonged state of liminality, under this shadow as secondary citizens or aliens with fewer public rights comparing with the urban residents. There is no "home" for them in this case, neither in the city or left in the countryside.

To sum up, the party-state's withdraw and the rising market forces broke the "big family" of *danwei* in the cities and the collectives in the countryside. Moreover, nowadays, economic development and accelerated mobility conflicts with the stark

policy inherited from Mao's era, which creates millions of to some extent "homeless" Chinese born in the countryside "floating" in the cities. As a communication major, I am interested in investigating how the new social fabric is represented, through which channel, with what effect and why. More importantly, I am curious to look into nowadays what is the new political imaginary of "family" on the mass media. Then first of all, let's start from understanding the Chinese media-mediated information environment:

### **3.4 Media Mediated Information Environment in China**

Different from media organizations in the Western countries where they are proud of their "independence" in a great sense, media organization in China are the organs of the ruling Party and are subject to the direction of the Central Propaganda Department, which is the ideological bureau of CCP Central Committee.

Prior research on Chinese media system has shown that Chinese media organizations function as a weapon of social mobilization, ideological reform and power struggle rather than function as information provider (e.g Barnett, 1979; R. L. Bishop, 1989; Chu, 1979a, 1979b; C.-C. Lee, 1994). Then since the mid-1980s, the Chinese media organizations have been going through a steady process of marketization, their role as the party's mouthpiece has been increasingly eroded by the powerful pressures from the market to pursue the commercial success (Y. Zhao, 1998). That is, the previously state-controlled "commandist" journalism (C.-C. Lee, 1990) has had to accommodate the market forces by toning down ideological rigidity. Some researchers have provided their observations about what have taken place in Chinese media: G. Yu (1993) argues that the mass media have expanded in scope, changed in structure, and become more diversified in character and content. C.-C. Lee (1994) echoes that Chinese media in the 1990s have "departed from the rigid, absolute, totalitarian control characteristics of the Cultural Revolution" (p.9). Chang, Wang and Chen (1994) sug-

gest that Chinese media message now should be viewed as social knowledge not the ideological propaganda. He and Chen (1998) conclude eight changes that have taken place with respect to Chinese press. They claim that, “changes in the Chinese press have promoted a paradigm shift in the 1950s and the development-oriented paradigm in the 1970s to a search for new conceptual frameworks” (He, 2000a, p.599). Ren and Singhal (Ren & Singhal, 2000) also report that economic advancement brought about expansion, diversification, and deregulation of mass media system in China in the post-Mao era. Although communication scholars debate the meaning of these changes, most of them agree that media in China now cater to a broader range of demands and requirements, ranging from the dictates of political leaders to the wants and needs of increasingly diversified and sophisticated audience (Lynch, 1999). In short, they are now redefined more as cultural industries than political tools.

Such changes in media are usually credited to China’s gradual economic liberalization. Since the party-state cut off financial support for media organizations, advertisements have become the main source of revenue for the media. However, though the undergoing “open and reform” policies have promoted the media to focus on promoting economic boom instead of power struggle as in previous years and thus has moved toward greater openness and diversity, the nature of the Chinese media still remain unchanged. (C.-C. Lee, 1994) warns that there still exists an “inherent paradox between political control and economic liberalism in Chinese media” (p. 10). According to Zhongdang Pan (2000)’s observation, Chinese media organizations have learned to improvise a variety of seemingly paradoxical editorial or marketing strategies to grasp market opportunities without violating official bounds. Though Chinese media mostly remain docile and are engaged in self-censorship, the party-state has shown in many cases that it will not hesitate to punish those testing the limits. That is, Chinese media organizations are still suffered from frequent political setbacks. For example, after the 1989 pro-democracy movement, while reflecting on media reform

and its role during the movement, CCP leaders reiterated the mouthpiece theory, and stressed the Party's tradition of positive propaganda (Y. Zhao, 1998). Another example comes from 1999, within a single year, twenty-seven newspapers were forced to close for political "mistakes" and other "violations" in the operation (*Apply Daily*, 2000).

The telling example for the fact that it is still the party-state that runs the show comes from the formation of Chinese media conglomerates. Entering the new Millennium, as media critics observe (C.-C. Lee et al., 2007), there is a strong desire to construct large Chinese media conglomerates that are believed can resist the likely invasion of transnational media corporations. One important feature in the formation of the Chinese media conglomerations is that they are established through a top-down bureaucratic-led merging process. In other words, the conglomerations are "hand-made" by the officials in the Central Propaganda Department, which is totally different from the case of market in the West.

While, with the "market" went deeper and this party-state regime has become more sophisticated, the state-sanctioned and market-driven discourse production system has gained the "last chance to make sudden huge profits in contemporary China" (F. Chen & Liang, 2001). Zhou He (2000a) characterizes that the Chinese media as having been transformed from brainwashing apparatuses to "Party-State Publicity Inc.." They have "the capitalist body that wears a socialist face." Yuezhi Zhao (1998) goes further and criticizes Chinese journalism represents the worst aspects of party journalism and commercialism.

Besides Chinese mass media system, Chinese journalistic professionals are also responsible for the "distorted" media mediated information environment. Some comparative studies on media professionalism (e.g. J.-H. Zhu, Weaver, Lo, Chen, & Wu, 1997; Ha, 1994) have revealed that Chinese journalistic professionalism differentiate their counterparts in other countries and areas. Zhu and his colleagues' cross-national

study (1997) on journalists' perceptions on media role have revealed that, though journalists in the three countries and areas concurrently consider media's role as an information provider most important, journalists in China are much more likely to perceive media role as an information interpreter than their counterpart. The implication, as the authors suggest, is Chinese journalists do not think audience "have an intrinsic ability to distinguish truth from falsehood" (p.94). They believe that it is their noble responsibility to "help the masses to make sense of daily events around the world" (p.94). Therefore, in journalistic practice, Chinese media professional always pose themselves as informed narrators of the news event. Ha (1994)'s comparative study of American and Chinese news reporting awards reveals that the Pulitzer prize-winning stories are prone to adopting more diverse news sources than their counterparts in China. Ha' research indicates that more than half of the American stories quoted over 10 sources in one story, and only 5.1 percent of the stories quoted less than three sources. However, Chinese prize-winning journalists, "depend heavily upon personal interview of a single source for information such as Party Secretary of a province" (p.67). (C.-C. Lee, 1994) suggests media professionalism cannot exist in social vacuum. Zhu et al. (1997)'s and Ha (Ha, 1994)'s studies on Chinese media professionalism suggest that media professionalism is heavily influenced by societal factors such as media structure and political system. For instance, although Chinese journalists boost themselves information providers and interpreters, the majority of news stories related to acute political information in China, only strictly follow the Party line of the current Chinese administration (Ha, 1994). Frequently, some issues that the public concerns are seldom reported or even not mentioned (G. Yu & Liu, 1995).

While, in retrospect, Chinese media professionals have strived to disengage from the authoritarian media's propaganda (for example, during the the spring of 1989), and attempted to establish a kind of Western style media professionalism, calling for

Western objective reporting, albeit their understandings are often crude and distorted (C.-C. Lee, 1994; Pan & Lu, 2003). Unfortunately, they lose the war after suffering successive collisions with the strong and effective propagandistic machine.

Zhou He (2000b) ascribes the ambiguities and contradictions that Chinese journalists face to a struggle to reduce ideological dissonance. According to He, working with a dying communist ideology, “most Chinese journalists feel a fairly strong dissonance between what they believe and what they have to express in the press, a major part of the public discourse universe in China” (p.608). He indicates Chinese journalists adopt one of five modes to cope with the ideological dissonance.<sup>3</sup> Judging from the five modes that Chinese journalists have adopted to cope with ideological dissonance, most Chinese media professionals adopt a very passive way to the authoritarian media’s propaganda. It seems that they know the truth, but they cannot tell the truth to the public. Therefore, the public becomes the solitary victim in the media game.<sup>4</sup>

### **Chinese Television Industry in Particular**

As discussed in Chapter 2, in the early stage of the Republic, China’s mass media infrastructure relied on radio/loudspeaker, backyard film, propaganda team and so on to link the universe discourse of the central government to the particular practice of the grass-root. Then when the television quickly got popularized in the reform era, there is finally a true “mass” medium of education, propaganda and entertainment in most of Chinese people’s life. Regarding this particular research concern on CCTV’s

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<sup>3</sup>According to (He, 2000b), the five modes to cope with ideological dissonance are, respectively, “1) living with dissonance in the public discourse universe; 2) striking a consonance with communist ideology; 3) consonance in the public discourse universe, but independent expression in the private discourse universe; 4) pushing boundaries in public discourse universe while keeping independent expression in the private discourse universe; and 5) radical reduction of dissonance by aligning with a different ideology and expressing deviant ideas in a different public discourse universe” (p.599).

<sup>4</sup>The possible active role of Chinese audience on constructing the political information environment will be the subject of Chapter 5.

Spring Festival Gala, I would like to offer a brief genealogical survey of the Chinese television industry, since actually, the trajectory of Chinese TV echoes and is also a powerful indicator of the sea change in the politics of the Chinese mass media.

China's first television experimental broadcasting was held at Beijing Television<sup>5</sup> station on May 1, 1958. Not long, during the catastrophic Cultural Revolution, the broadcasting was frequently disrupted if not completely stopped because of the limitation of technology, staff and footage. Twenty years later since the first broadcasting - in 1978, right before the opening up and economic reform started, China had merely 32 television stations across the country (Hong, 1998). Correspondingly, there were only 3.4 million television sets nationwide in the same year, but by then China had nearly 1 billion people (Y. Zhao, 1998). It was until the reform was taken off that television became the country's most rapidly growing mass medium. Specifically, the 1980s witnessed a skyrocketing growth of production and sales of television set as a common household necessity. A phenomenon (Lull, 1991) regards as similar to what happened in the United States in the 1950s.

By 1990, Chinese families owned about 150 million television sets. The rapid growth of the number of viewers stimulated the proliferation of in more stations, more channels, as well as in the extension of daily broadcast hours (Y. Zhao, 1998). By the middle of 1990s, China had about 700 local stations, and television had gained entry into most households, especially in urban areas (Hong, 1998). According to Hong (ibid), by the 1990s television had surpassed more traditional forms of mass media, particularly newspaper and radio, and had become the most important medium in Chinese people's daily life.

As aforementioned, since the beginning of the economic reform, as the party-state gradually cutting subsidies for the media and encouraging them to make a profit in

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<sup>5</sup>On the same day, it was renamed China's Central Television (CCTV).



the market, the new logic and mechanism unavoidably entered and influenced the once tightly controlled media infrastructure. China's first TV commercial appeared in the late 1970s; in 1988, according to Yuezhi Zhao (1998), for the first time, the party-state clearly stated that TV broadcasting should depend on multiple channels of financing. Commercial advertising then gradually became the most important source of this medium's revenue. Nevertheless, in March 2001, the then Chief of CCP's Central Propaganda Department, Ding Guanggen, claimed that the party-state must still maintain the primary ownership and content control no matter how the market was deep into the industry.

Meanwhile, the party-state has realized the unavoidable influence of global popular culture since its opening up. Its response is that on the one hand keeping a close examination of any political-related content, on the other hand, largely encouraging the development of television as a major entertainment source. As a result, variety shows, soap operas, MTV and these days the reality show have permeated the little screen.

As far as CCTV is concerned, on May 1st 1978, the then Beijing Television was rename as China's Central Television (CCTV) and became the only national television network - this status has never been changed. It is under direct watch of the Propaganda Department of the CCP's Central Committee and the State Administration of Radio, Film and television. The unique role of CCTV as a government agency responsible for media production and the state propaganda is worth noting. It is designed to unify the country through "presentation of official news and information, culturally-appropriate entertainment, and use of the official dialect" (Hong, 1998, p. 22), and although CCTV has no direct administration over local stations, it enjoys many privileges because of its state-sanctioned central status, specifically in terms of human resources, technical capabilities, coverage, etc. In a word, CCTV has the predominant role in the Chinese television industry since the very beginning.

To sum up, nowadays, television has marginalized if not replaced other media to become one of the most powerful ideological state apparatuses in Chinese society. It plays a major role in rebuilding a shared culture as well as consolidating a shared national sentiment and identity in the post-Mao China. In other words, with television, Chinese people's daily cultural activities are redirected to the living room of every single family, centering around the little magic box which is remotely but effectively controlled by the party-state.

### **3.5 Domesticate Culture into Politics**

In the meantime, as Ann Anagnost (1997) points out that as a legacy of the excessive use of political ritual during the Cultural Revolution, that sort of blind political certainty has long gone, and distrust of anything ideological is sweeping across the country, which posits one of the most profound challenges in the post-Mao period. However, she continues, despite the party's present emphasis on liberalizing the economy and perhaps even because of this, "its ideological project remains critically important to its self-definition" (p.101). At the same time as we know, stepping on the blood of 1989's Tiananmen Square entering the 1990s, the commercialization of cultural production has largely transformed Chinese from the still targets of propaganda to gradually mature consumers of cultural commodities. This change has clearly increased the difficulty in promoting any ideological projects.

To domesticate culture into politics is actually a long-term cultural policy of the CCP. As early as in 1942 when Mao Zedong gave "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and the Arts," he had settle down the baseline of the party's - then the state's cultural policy - all literature had been class-based and thus the proletarian literature and arts should serve the masses in the fights against the exploiting classes. In the 1980s, after the three decades of radical socialism, the public intellectual Li Zehou among many others advocated to "distance cultural activity from political

reality by valorizing culture over and above other aspects of social life” (cited from K. Liu & Tang, 1993, p.25). This pursuit of independence of the cultural field, I would argue, is more a strategy to secure a room for the independence in the party-state dominated discourse universe for the intellectual group, who just survived from the cultural catastrophe. Unfortunately, this pursuit ended on the 1989’s Tiananmen Square.

Entering the 1990s, under the new circumstances, although the party-state still maintains the powerful, defining voice in the public universe as a historical continuity of a system that was so institutionally entrenched, it has learned to package and “peddle” its ideologies in more popular forms and exert its power in a far more nuanced and complex way. To be specific, it has learnt to negotiate with both commercial and popular interests. A telling case is the “Yearnings phenomenon:” “Yearnings” (*Kewang*) is a highly popular television soap opera aired since January 1991, one year and a half after the Tiananmen Crackdown. The party-state quickly saw the potential effectiveness of this melodrama to promote the virtues of tolerance, faithfulness and harmony on softening and detaching the audience from any immediate political actions (S. H.-P. Lu, 1996). Li Ruihuan, then head of ideology and propaganda, acclaimed the melodrama as a model to be learned by all “cultural workers”:

*The influence we exert must be subtle, imperceptible, and the people should be influenced without being conscious of it. In order to make socialist principles and moral virtues acceptable to the broad masses, we must learn to use the forms that the masses favor (cited in S. H.-P. Lu, 1996, p. 162).*

To sum up, I agree with what Wang Jing (2001) warns that the party-state will never give up its propaganda tool even though the old mechanics of the relationships between culture and politics have been challenged. She outlines a complete picture of how cultural discourses are intermingled with state policies through various “culturally friendly” forms or as “common sense,” thereby complete the “naturalization of

ruling technologies” in the post-1992 China. In the same vein, David Goodman (2001) argues that in the reform era the traditional reductionist view of cultural control is far from sufficient to explain the practices of the party-state in this regard. He claims that instead of loosening control on the ideological realm, “new cultural activities tend to have even closer relationships with the party-state” (p.249) and “few of the new agents of cultural change have had no connection with the party-state” (p.248). As a result, in the contemporary China, the line between ideological teaching and everyday enculturation is actually blurring (Goodman, 2001; C.-C. Lee, 2000; B. Zhao, 1998; Y. Zhao, 1998). In a word, culture to a great degree is domesticated by politics in a more subtle and complex way in the post-Mao era.

Under such circumstances, as far as the construction of the “super family” is concerned, the party-state never hesitates to devote resources into perpetuating this political imaginary and keeping compelling ordinary Chinese to take part in. Spring Festival Gala, censored in person by top leaders in charge of China’s propaganda and ideology, is a telling case in point. Every year, the collective super family will be sung out on China’s No.1 stage, in lyrics like:

*Fifty-six constellations are fifty-six flowers; Brothers and sisters of fifty-six different ethnicities are the family; Fifty-six languages crystallize into one sentence: Love my China, love my China, love my China . . .*

*Ai Wo Zhonghua* (“Love My China,” chorus, 2000’s Gala)

Entering the new millennium, this kind of paeon perhaps serves as a startling reminder for outside observers as how the revolution once intermixed notions about politics and the family, not to mention the puzzle why the post-collectivism party-state insists on a mirror image of the collectivism. However, the truth is that the Gala is at least the most commercially successful show, on the CCTV’s stage. In the following chapter, I will examine in detail how the “super family” is constructed and presented on CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala every year. I will reveal that no matter

how “carnival” it looks like, this Gala carries its statist agenda and is an important site of symbolic significance.

## CHAPTER 4

### SPRING FESTIVAL GALA: MIXED WINE IN THE OLD BOTTLE

*... symbolic displays of power not only operate in tandem with overt coercive controls, they are themselves a sub-system of coercive control.*

—Lisa Wedeen (1999, p.27)

#### 4.1 Preamble

This study is by nature a case study. Case study as a research method is different from the “sampling” methods which aim at drawing sweeping generalizations about certain topic. The goal of the researcher who employs case study, simply put, is to understand the unique case(s) thoroughly, in order to maximize what can be learned from the case(s) selected (Stake, 2005). Therefore, the case selection is crucial.

In this chapter, I aim at revealing how the arrangements and circulations of images, words and performances normalize ideological articulation. In doing so, this chapter takes a close look at the televised Gala to examine the ways in which officially sanctioned messages are planted into every bit and piece of performance on this festival celebrating stage. I will explain in the chapter in detail why the Gala could serve as a distinctive site, a primary case study for my research. I will also argue, with a detailed discussion of the Gala, it is an exemplified case of a contemporary political spectacle.

## 4.2 Introduction

CCTV's annual Spring Festival Gala was first launched in 1983. It has been broadcast live nationwide on Spring Festival's eve (also known as Lunar New Year's eve) for 32 years. In April 2012, it was officially recorded by *Guinness World Records* as the most watched variety show in the world. It is also the longest and the one with the biggest number of the talented to participate in.<sup>1</sup>

Since 1994, the CCTV's own market-research survey center has started to report to nationwide viewers the viewing-rate of every year's Gala. 2013's Gala for example, it is estimated that at least 750 million people spent the night watching this CCTV's Gala and viewing rate reaches 70.88%.<sup>2</sup> Although frequently people doubt about the accuracy of the surveys' results, since they are mostly conducted by CCTV itself, the popularity of CCTV Spring Festival Gala in China is beyond doubt. In fact, since the Gala now is beamed to the whole world via satellite and Internet, it is also popular among overseas Chinese.

While, the influence of this Gala is way beyond a popular TV show. It has become institutionalized as part of the ritual of the Chinese New Year celebration, a "new custom" as the media often refer to. CCTV itself often refers to it as "our spiritual 'Nian Ye Fan'" (the traditional family reunion dinner on Spring Festival Eve). Scholars (e.g. B. Zhao, 1998) also witness and agree to the unique status of this Gala as an indispensable part of Spring Festival culture. Bin Zhao (1998) further puts it by claiming that, in the age of media's global capacity of reaching, to be "Chinese" for Chinese at home and abroad could mean one more thing: whether they share the joy of the CCTV staged happy gathering on the small screen.

As a show of this kind of popularity, the performers on this stage are well selective and "representative." They are big stars or very promising young talented from

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<sup>1</sup>More see: <http://baike.baidu.com/view/25245.htm?fromId=55996>. browsed on Feb 20, 2013.

<sup>2</sup>[http://cul.shangdu.com/news/2010/20130218/342\\_5767571.shtml](http://cul.shangdu.com/news/2010/20130218/342_5767571.shtml), browsed on Feb 20, 2013.

different regions of the country. It is required to be “*Lao Shao Xian Yi*” (appealing to both the young audience and to the old), also required to include both the local vernacular styles and the highest level of artistic performance, to appear trendy as well as attractive to the more traditional viewers, to be attractive to people living in the Southern China as well as those living in the furthest Northeast. These requirements put together and form a complex grid for each year’s show. After three decades, innovations or even variations within the grid have mostly been exhausted. For a long time, the Gala has three fixed “mainstays” (B. Zhao, 1998): singing and dancing (*ge wu*), mini-dramas (*xiaopin*) and cross-talks (*xiangsheng*). Ever since the end of 2012’s Gala, 2013 Gala’s producer and director-in-chief Ha Wen announced that the next year’s primary pursuit would be “innovation,” but the major innovation as later we saw was mainly regarding the stage’s special effects.

### **4.3 An Actual CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala on the Stage**

I take 2012 CCTV Spring Festival Gala as the showcase. It started at 8:00PM shape Beijing Time as usual on the January 22, 2012, the Lunar New Year Eve. The officially announced theme of the year was “returning home and celebrating the lunar new year with the family” (*huijia guo danian*). It was divided into four sections, respectively called “Dragon year,” “home/family,” “the Gala’s thirty years,” and “all Chinese people under the heaven belong to a singular family.” It took the No.1 Studio of CCTV that night as usual and was broadcast synchronously by CCTV-1, CCTV-3, CCTV-4, CCTV-13, CCTV-English News, CCTV-Spanish, CCTV-French, CCTV-Arabian, CCTV-Russian and CCTV-high definition, also streamed online and reshipped by over 20 provincial television stations at that night.



### 4.3.1 The Opening of the Show

Let's take a close look of the typical opening presentation to see how the Gala is kicked off:

Hosts are all "familiar faces" from CCTV: Zhu Jun, Li Yong, Dong Qin, Bi Fujian, Sa Beining - expect one: Li Sisi ("something new;" Innovation is required but also required to be displayed in a limited scope). Z: This is the live studio of 2012 CCTV Spring Festival Gala. Thank you Chinese sons and daughters of all ethnicities, Thank you all Chinese across the globe, for joining us celebrating this Dragon year!

D: All the valued friends gather together here. Let's celebrate the united festival. Thank you thousands of families sitting in front of the television waiting for this festival to start! Thank you all the invited guests in the studio for being in your families and celebrate the Lunar New Year Eve with us!

L: Here is another annual celebration on this stage for the Spring Festival. Thank you all the audience for staying with CCTV's Spring Festival Gala for the past thirty years! B: In this lively and jubilant evening, at this time of grand reunion, we are grateful for the great Chinese civilization which lasts for thousands of years. Let's celebrate the united Chinese New Year! Bless the following generations and bless the eastern part of the world!

In this short while typical opening presentation, "get together" / "united" / "reunion" were mentioned 4 times, "Chinese nation" / "Chinese civilization" / "Chinese across the globe" / "eastern part of the world" 4 times, "celebration" 3 time, and that the show has been broadcast for thirty years is specifically pointed out: As China experienced a number of wars and turmoil in its modern and contemporary history, thirty-year non-stop annual broadcasting equals some serious commitment, something may qualify as "shared memory." That all Chinese, beyond the geographic, ethnical and political boundaries, get together to celebrate is the motif throughout the Gala. Every effort is put into to make the fleeting four and a half hours on this stage ex-

perienced together by “all Chinese across the globe.” Beijing and particularly this stage at this night is presented as the sole focus for all Chinese under the heaven. The emphasis of this kind of “togetherness” is crucial for the “national family.”

Then the show officially began, entering the first section “Dragon year”:

#### **4.3.2 Section 1: “Dragon” - Symbolizing China: Cultural Essentialism in Practice**

The year 2012 was the year of dragon in the Chinese zodiac. In this section under the catchword “Dragon,” one episode of three which had the word “dragon” in the titles, was particularly interesting. It was the fifth program of this evening, performed by Mainland-born internationally rewarded pianist Li Yundi and Hong Kong-born singer Wang Lihong, called *Long De Chuanren* (The Descendants of Dragon). It was the second time this song performed on this stage and clearly a salute to the original one, which was performed in 1985’s Gala by the first Chinese-born mayor in the United States, Dr. Daniel Wong. On the 2012’s stage, Wang Lihong was deliberately selected also because he is the song’s original singer Li Fujian’s nephew. It has metaphorical implications as blood (as well as loyalty) running in the family, generation after generation.

The lyrics of *Descendants of Dragon* offers clearly an essentialized description of being Chinese:

*Far in the east, there is a “jiang,” Its name is Chang Jiang (Long River);*

*Far in the east, there is a “he,” Its name is Huang He (Yellow River)...*

*In the ancient east, there is a dragon, Its name is China.*

*In the ancient east, there is a group of people,*

*Who are all descendants of the dragon.*

*At the foot of the dragon I grow,*

*Growing into the dragon's descendants.*

*Black eyes, black hairs and yellow skin,*

*Forever descendants of the dragon.*

...

In fact, “dragon” is an image that frequents this stage. As early as in the 1988’s Gala, a song named *Zhongguo Long* (Chinese Dragon) was performed, and the word “dragon” was repeated in every sentence of the lyrics. And then internationally recognized action movie star *Chan Long* (Jackie Chan) led an episode in 1993’s Gala, called *Longgu Xuantian Zhen Sihai* (World-Shaking Dragon Drum). It was a traditional dragon and lion dance with some modern elements added in. The 2000’s Gala opened with a red dragon flag flying across the “sky” of the CCTV broadcast studio over and over. As also a year of dragon in Chinese Zodiac, this year’s studio was decorated with different images of dragon everywhere. In 2006’s Gala, a biggest hit of that year *Bai Jia Xing* (Book of Hundred Surnames) sang out that “the spirit filling our hearts is always the glory of the *Nation of Dragon*.” I will not further belabored readers with similar examples, as I believe the aforementioned ones have already effectively delivered my point.

Dragon is a constructed image that used snake as the archetype and came into being after synthesizing various characteristics of totems from different tribes. It was a mythical animal that symbolizes vitality, strength, and power. Besides the performances and interpretations surrounding “dragon” all these years on this stage, the rivers as a national symbol that often reflect a nation’s certain history, myth, attitude responding to nature, as also evoked in *Descendants of the Dragon*, are exploited to the same degree. The Yellow River and the Long River, which have long been acclaimed as two “mother rivers” of Chinese Civilization in both official and popular discourses, come no surprise as also being appropriated as part of the essentialization,

the same as Yangtze River, Great Wall, Mount Yellow, Mount Everest, Mount Tai, and so on.

Over the past 30 years of broadcasting of Spring Festival Gala, episodes of this kind abound since the very beginning. For example, in the song *Wo De Zhongguoxin* (My Chinese Heart) sung by Zhang Mingmin in 1984, it had such a sentence like “Yangtze River, Great Wall, Mount Yellow, Yellow River, all these images are so heavy in my heart.” In the 1985 gala, there was a song titled *Wangli Changcheng Yongbudao* (The Great Wall Never Falls). In the 1988 broadcast for instance, Peng Liyuan, the political songstress par excellence, made an “ontological” statement of “who we are” in a song called *Women Shi Huanghe, Women Shi Taishan* (We Are the Yellow River, We are the Mount Tai). The same story has repeated itself again and again. As a result, we “descendants of dragon” from time immemorial “have been singing from Long River to Yellow River” (*Luogu* [Gongs and Drums], 1997); we have been “hanging the Chinese red lanterns one generation after another” (*Da Hong Denglong* [The Big Red Lantern], 1998); we have been keeping “asking Long River” (*Wen Changjiang* [Asking the Long River], 1998), which is “running forever and ever” (*Changjiang Chang* [Long River is Long], 2000) and we will repeatedly sing *Changjiang Zhige* (The Song of Long River, 2009).

The same as the “black eyes, black hairs and yellow skins.” These “essences” are undecipherable. They are “traditional” and thus “timeless,” hence present the Chinese nation’s particulates and distinguish it from all other nations. Audience in the global reach are told again and again, explicitly as well as implicitly, that our national family and five-thousand-year civilization is comprised, nurtured and guarded by these essential objects, therefore, it is our noble duty as the proud inheritors to carry on these cultural essences and protect the national family.

Besides these holy objects, the essentializing efforts can also be drawn from symbolized human beings, for example, the military, the athletes, astronauts, and so on.

In other words, this kind of representation also contains a great amount of ideological substance and implications. For example, in every year's Gala, there are dancers and singers invited from the military service. They are actually the most stable and important participators on this stage. For one, the current "first lady" Peng Liyuan, who has sung on this stage 20 times, is from the military. Wearing their military uniforms or not, they clearly identify themselves by expressing their complete dedication to the idealized, beloved national family in their songs. In the past thirty years, again and again, the hosts and hostesses reminded the Gala's audience with deeply emotional tone as "please do not forget, in this chilly outside while supposed to be united and warm inside night, our brave young soldiers who are standing on each and every border line, protecting our motherland, so that they parents and siblings like you and me can enjoy the holiday together." Whether objectifying China into a few immortal codes or personifying it into several groups of most dedicating people, the purpose of this essentializing process is to deliberately define what means being "Chinese" and exclude all the "others."

#### **4.3.3 Section 2: "Family/ Home" - Ideology of "Return" and "Reunion"**

Celebrating Spring Festival has traditionally been an important family matter in China. Families are supposed to get together, having a well-prepared somewhat extravagant annual dinner, waving away the old year and welcoming the new one with the most beloved ones. In other words, traditionally, the Spring Festival is a time of family happy gathering. However, ever since the debut of CCTV's Spring Festival Gala in 1983, in B. Zhao's words, this traditional family gathering has taken on "a distinctive national character" (1998, p.43). While the mass media-mediated celebration steps into thousands of Chinese people's living rooms, people's imagination about the festival and even about being "Chinese" is tremendously expanded, as they are constantly reminded that they are, right now, celebrating with the entire

national family within and beyond the physical territory of China. In other words, on this stage, there are numerous moments showing how people foster a particular set of creative performances, to “return” to and “reunion” with the entire national family.

On the specific 2012’s stage, the second section included an innovative mini-documentary *huijia guonian* (Return Home to Celebrate the Chinese New Year). It was about three sisters as migrant workers “drifting” in different provinces across the country who took all sorts of possible ways of transportation, from trains, buses, to flatbed tricycles, just in order to get back to parents’ house - *lao jia* (old home) - in a small town on the northern border to celebrate the most important holiday with other extended family members. The odyssey-like return journey was carefully documented and accompanied with emotionally-laden music. There was also a solo with group dance titled “It has been a long time that I haven’t returned to my country home.” Then came another song performed by the famous military singer Song Zuyin named *zaijiao yisheng bama* (Allow me call it again ‘Mom!’ ‘Dad!’). An “ordinary” peasant was also invited to the Gala, who introduced himself in a brief humble way and then sang a solo full of emotion with his great while untrained voice entitled *Wo Yao Huijia!* (I want to go home!) It was followed by a group dance *Wode Laomama* (My old mom).

As mentioned earlier, in the past two decades, one of the most striking structural changes in China is the emergence of the so-called “floating population,” which, till nowadays, includes over 200 million people on the move. Most of them are migrant workers from the rural area to big cities or coastal areas. The influx of the population from rural to urban has significantly reconfigured the Chinese social landscape. Since China is in the midst of the biggest and fastest rural to urban migration in the human history, “home” is becoming unprecedentedly uncertain and ambiguous, vague and confusing. The migrant workers’ return and reunion with their rural families have

become a preeminent topic in the recent years on CCTV's Spring Festival Gala. By promoting the unparalleled loyalty to home and the ideas of "going home," the Gala in the recent years captured many Chinese's hearts in such a big festival of reunion. In this section, through the mouth of the three sisters, the show addressed directly to the whole country that "It is all about going home. No matter how far away we are from home, literally by all means, we will go back to reunite with aging parents and blood relatives...even though our lives have been experiencing tremendous changes in the cities, our hearts beating for the hometown unchangeably."

In fact, many symbols that are associated with Chinese festivals such as Moon, lanterns, rice glue balls, spring cakes, etc. all of them are in round shape. They in fact symbolize "unity" or "reunion," and further suggest completeness and thus perfection. Return and reunion is one of the classic topics when talking about the ethics of Chinese traditional family, since in Chinese tradition, the pursuit of reunion suggests the recognition and respect to the ethics of patriarchal system, which is also in the round shape as Fei Xiaotong pointed out (1992 [1947]), and it is always a move towards the power center, the elders' house. Through all these "reunion" rituals, the society reaches its harmony. In 1997's Gala, a song was sung in the very beginning to ignite the show called *Da Tuanyuan* (Great Reunion), and the lyrics was: "The round is the sky, the round is the earth, the round is every family, and the round is the national family.... Every family is united and all Chinese sons and daughters are united together towards the eternity." Another example comes from 2004's Gala. The Taiwanese singer Jiang Yuheng and mainland singer Zhu Hai performed a song together. The name is *Kewang Tuanyuan* (Yearning for the Reunion), and the lyrics read: "We long for the reunion, the reunion; The moon in the sky is already full; Same ancestors and same blood, Same root and same hearts... On this side of the strait, people's hair has already been turning gray, On the other side of the strait, you see people's eyes have also been so tired of waiting, What a fortune for a family

to reunite, The reunification of the country is our ultimate happiness...” These performances clearly utilize “family” as “the master metaphor of the nation” (Duara, 1996, p.45). This kind of utilization is abound in each and every show and will be discussed in detail in 4.3.5.

#### **4.3.4 Section 3: “Gala’s Thirty Years” - Historicizing the TV Festival and the Historical Becomes Personal**

Promoting nostalgia is also a way to “return.” In the third section which designed to salute to the history of this very show. Some most welcomed performances in the 80s and 90s re-stepped on the stage - Nowadays in China, any cultural products against the backdrop of past collective era, or the era when “people were poor but pure,” a reclaiming of something that has been “lost,” has the ring of nostalgia: followed a mini-documentary called “memories of the Gala,” six most popular songs and a dance that once impressed Chinese at home and abroad on this stage got rerun. For example, Zhang Mingmin returned and sang his most famous “My Chinese Heart.” Almost thirty years ago, with his successful performance in 1984’s gala, the song became a huge hit, which had been popular for almost three decades. Another widely-recognized song, “Clouds from My Hometown,” which was first performed at the 1987 CCTV gala sung by Fei Xiang, a Taiwan-born, Broadway singer, was also re-performed on this stage. Twenty-five years ago, before starting the song, Fei told the audience in the studio and at the same time nationwide, in tears, that he would like to dedicate it to his great grandmother, who was a centenarian and still lived in Shandong Province. Its lyrics and Fei’s original “personal” performance evoked deliberate double images of one singular great China that went beyond political or geographical definitions that is bound by the blood and cultural heritage, while not limited by any political or geographical definitions. Fei Xiang was thus widely promoted after the show and has become an iconic figure in the Mainland ever since



then. This year he was invited back, singing “Come back! Come back!” after he himself continued his “drifting” for other 25 years. In the meanwhile, another huge hit of him which also got popular originally from this stage, “The Fire in the Winter,” was sung by a young, energetic female singer. In the end of this section, it was a mini show combined Chinese martial arts and a popular song called *Chunwan Chuanqi* (The Legend of Spring Festival), which tried to promote the show into a legendary position.

Nowadays in China, this set of performances aiming at evoking nostalgia touched the feelings of millions. At a time when market forces are transforming people’s relations beyond recognition, with the natural human bonds based on blood, proximity and community quickly disintegrating, a nostalgia for the “good old days,” no matter what concrete content it contains, has prevailed. Despite all the cynicism of a post-totalitarian era, perhaps just because of the cynicism of this age, the serious treatment and expressive feelings towards people’s personal history in a society experiencing unprecedented pace of change invoke emotional echoes every time. The 2012’s show also invited the first generation of writers, producers and directors of CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala to the studio and the camera kept focusing on their aging faces. Again in this tremendously changed and changing world, “growing older together” is regarded as certain serious commitment, and thus the source of legitimacy of the high standing of the show.

Moreover, in the CCTV live studio, the stage of the gala is surrounded by many middle-sized round tables, with five to eight guests each, performers or social celebrities of all kinds and some of their families sitting at the tables as well. It mimics a family-gathering dinner of the night and literally put the show as the main course of this important dinner. In the 2012’s Gala, the director cast the special spot light on some ordinary individuals, telling their life stories as members of the larger family. Such a strategy brings “big” back into “small”, and enables the “imagined commu-

nity” (Anderson, 1991) of the Chinese nation to be echoed by concretized personal experiences.

In the following Section 4, let’s see how the homecoming inclinations are translated into a national symbolic.

#### **4.3.5 Section 4: “The Chinese People under Heaven Belong to A Singular Family”**

In the Section 4, what followed the emotionally expressive solo “I want to go home!” was a group dance “old moms.” Then here came another solo “My home in the faraway place,” and then was a collective dancing and singing called *Meili Zhonghua* (Beauty of China) presented by a group of ethnic performers. The last three programs were all dancing and singing with groups of performers, which promoted the atmosphere and motif of this night to the perk. There were respectively *Sixiang Qu* (Nostalgic Melody), *Juanlian* (Attachment), and *Tianxia Yijia* (All Chinese people under heaven belong to a singular family).

Every year CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala will emphasize the ideology of “reunion” of those who share the blood. By the sleight of hand, under the Chinese family-oriented consciousness and traditional “familial mode of social organization” (Yan, 2003), it easily becomes the reunion of all the “descendants of the dragon,” “descendants of Emperors Yan and Huang,” “children of the ancient and great Chinese Nation” and the like. It is particularly representable through the case that the overseas Chinese are unreservedly attached to the Chinese national family as the Gala repeatedly and “artistically” depict they are culturally nostalgic and spiritually home-bound. Specifically, China is personified as a loving, caring and strong-willed mother who is waiting for her traveling sons and daughters to come back. It is undoubtedly a powerful way to overlap home with nation/state. On 1996’s stage, Gao Feng and Liu Xiaona’s *Da Zhongguo* (Big China) is an excellent example of this double-image,

which carried complex layerings of signification and later became the biggest hit of that year: “We belong to the same family whose name is ‘China.’ We have lots of sisters and brothers; the scenery is particularly good over here. Two dragons crouching at home are Long River and Yellow River. And, Mount Everest is the highest hill. . . Our big China is such a great family. She has been suffering through so many winds and rains! Our big China is such a great family. Forever and ever, I will be her side!”

The function of the gala in promoting this kind of nationalist if not statist ideology has been clear since the early years. For one, the 1995’s motif of the show was expressed as three layers of meaning behind “reunion,” which did powerfully reveal the double image of the (national) family: “family reunion, multi-ethnic gathering, and coagulation of all descendants of the Yan and Huang.”

Another good example came from the 2006’s Gala: in the background different family names flew across the big screen. Three singers, one from the mainland China (Man Wenjun), one from Taiwan (Yu Chengqing), and the third from Hong Kong (Xie Tingfeng), sang in a trio called *Baijia Xing* (Books of Hundred Surnames). It was a metaphorical way of speaking: using the dozens of surnames that Chinese had been using for generations to denote each and every ordinary family that together comprise the “big China.”

Specifically, Man from the Mainland led the show: “The same ancestors are *Yan* and *Huang* (emperor), The same roots are in *Han* and *Tang* (dynasty).”

Xie: “Chinese characters are straight and square. Our parents bring up our Chinese nation.”

Yu: “Chinese hearts are strong and well-disciplined; the burning incense builds up the strong nation of *Huaxia*.”

Chorus: “No matter *Li* or *Zhang*, all of our family names come from *Bai Jia Xing*; the blood that runs in our veins is always linked with Yellow River and Long River.

Whether *Zhao* or *Wang*, all of our family names come from *Bai Jia Xing*; what fills our hearts with is always the glory of the Nation of Dragon.”

...

By carefully choosing performers from different geographic parts of China to together present the show, it upheld a clear message that these different parts shared the same group of family names, and thus under the same family roof.

Actually, in order to construct the image that all “Chinese under the heaven” are celebrating the Spring Festival together as a singular family, the show drives home the message in every way possible. One eye-catching practice is that each year, the hosts of the Gala will deliberately and repeatedly interrupt the performance to read “New Year’s greeting” telegrams or telephone messages or show pictures from embassies, overseas Chinese organizations, overseas students in each and every continent of the world, as well as military posts located in the most remote Chinese borders or workers who are still “fighting on the frontline” thus cannot enjoy their festival. A typical message would be like, “In this particular day of family reunion, we send our best wishes from New York, and represent all the Chinese students and scholars here to our beloved motherland and its people. We miss you so much!” It is making the stage within CCTV’s No.1 stage the center of the world and all Chinese are concentric tonight and their hearts are beating synchronically with “Beijing Time”!

To sum up, by taking over the opportunity and motivating the resources from celebrating this traditional biggest festival in China, CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala has created an amazing dialogical moment between the high politics and its people, between the tradition and its modern renovation, between the nation and the party-state, between Chinese at home and abroad, between “us” and “them,” etc. But all in all, it is a key moment every year that the central power promoting the singular national family image to all the Chinese under the heaven.

In the following discussion, I try to answer why the party-state informed with the neo-liberal mentality spends so many resources and energy every year to produce a spectacle that depends on tired patriotic slogans and only requires the external and easily falsified trappings of loyalty. And is it a “carnival” as some scholars argue the Gala is?

#### 4.4 Discussion: Spectacle As Visualized Ideology

Bring back the aforementioned Zhang Mingmin’s *My Chinese Heart*: as a song about how an overseas sojourner misses and praises his motherland, it in fact has nothing to do with the Spring Festival. Then, how a song has nothing to do with this festival caused a sensation again and again in the Gala? It is because that the CCTV’s grand show is more about promoting the image of all Chinese people, physically or spiritually, united under the roof of national family at this specific moment, than celebrating the festival itself. It is revealing from the most repeated line used by those hosts and hostesses every year, which is “Wish the weather is seasonable in the coming year and our contented people living in a country at peace!” In a word, the “national family” is the only main character on this stage at this specific night.

To answer the question of the true nature of certain production, (Real, 1996, p.149) suggests the investigators to ask some seemingly “obvious” but revealing questions, such as:

*Who made this cultural practice or product?*

*Under what conditions was it created and with what purposes?*

*Who owns the product and gains financially from its sales?*

*How is the product distributed, and who benefits from it?*

*Are corporate and financial interests influencing other aspects of the process?*

*Is there a competitive environment and a level playing field among all participants?*

This is the approach I will follow in order to understand the nature of CCTV's Spring Festival Gala:

#### **4.4.1 A "Carnival" Or Not?**

Very intriguingly, as official and political as it is, the CCTV's Spring Festival Gala is always called a "carnival," both in the official and even popular discourses, as Geng claimed in her book title *Carnival in China* (2003). It is understandable since on the one hand, as the producer, CCTV has invested tremendous organizational resources to present its most important show annually. To be specific, it normally will take months of intensive work of planning, designing, competing, selecting, rehearsing, and then finally staging. Maybe two months ahead, the Internet and different newspapers' entertainment sections across the country have started to gossip about the Gala of this year: who will be there, who (normally a big star who frequents the show) has been washed out for whatever reasons, who will be the director-in-chief and what is his/her previous works, what the programs will be like, what is this year's motif and what is the highlight of the year, so on and so forth. Moreover, it is seemingly characterized by celebratory performances, and thousands of families together spend this festival night by watching it. Furthermore, each year during the show, the viewers' involvement is constantly called upon. For example, they may participate through interactive media like Internet spontaneously, or call in anytime. Indeed, huge efforts have been made to bring in a sense of "communal" experience among the viewers across the country, who spend the night and enter the new year with its company.

I have to admit that the comprehensive involvement of show viewers across geographic, political, social/economic, gender and age divides, even before and after the show, does make the Gala own certain attributes like a carnival (Bakhtin, 1984).

But do these “happiness,” “celebration,” “blessings,” “greetings” and so on live up to the standard of a carnival? It requires firstly the normative understanding about the word “carnival.”

According to Lisa Wedeen (1999), carnivals are the occasion for inverting hierarchies and subverting official standards; they enable people to come together and parody, ridicule, and blaspheme the conventional. Compared with this definition of carnival, the Spring Festival Gala has nothing close to subvert the power hierarchies or ruling ideology. What generates “laughter, joyous acts, creative role-plays, and other performances” (Wedeen, 1999) is not the inversion of any kind to the established political and ideological control. Rather, in order to ensure the high-level political and ideological “correctness,” the censorship system inbuilt is watertight: besides the designated Gala director, it also involves leaders in CCTV, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television, and the Party’s Propaganda Department into the extremely detail-driven reviewing and censoring process. For each and every performance, there are over 80 different elements and aspects will be taken into consideration. The preparation of a new gala normally starts right after the farewell song of this year’s broadcast into the air. Usually during the last month of preparation, there would be 6-7 dress rehearsals.<sup>3</sup> No episode can be regarded as “finalized” until a week before the New Year Eve, the same as the hosts’ and hostesses’ narrative.<sup>4</sup> In a word, the official scrutiny comes across every inch of the Gala’s content.

Another well-known arrangement also reveals the official status of the show: Ever since 1993, the Ministry of Radio, Film, and Television has officially delegated CCTV Spring Festival Gala’s monopoly status, by requiring local and provincial TV stations

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<sup>3</sup><http://opinion.voc.com.cn/article/201302/20130227110940797.html>

<sup>4</sup>In 2007’s Gala, one of the hosts Zhang Zequn made tiny mistake when recited his lines. He explained that there was almost no time left for him to memorize every sentence since the revised version came in too late. He disappeared from the stage of CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala ever since. <http://news.sohu.com/20070220/n248304946.shtml>

to relay the CCTV gala on Spring Festival eve. The situation hasn't been changed until 2011. When six provincial TV stations announced the news that they will present their own festival celebration instead of relaying CCTV's, the news made appearances on multiple national media.<sup>5</sup>

In the meanwhile, outside of the studio, this most important festival in China is actually often accompanied by limited access and much tightened security. In other words, although the broadcast celebration has tried hard to create an all-celebratory and interactive gesture with the audience, but outside the media-mediated environment, the real world, maybe just blocks away from your home, is perhaps closely watched by the "Big Brother" or simply inaccessible for the ordinary people.

Therefore, the Gala is not a carnival by nature, although it has its similarity to the carnival, such as certain level of creative performance on the folk customs. The specific political function of the Gala based upon can also be told from its attitude towards commercials: first of all, ever since the rapid commercialization of Chinese media industry, CCTV has been known for its great success in profit making. Down to this specific show, Bin Zhao (1998) has noted that if subjected to the strict law of the market, the CCTV's Spring Festival Gala would have probably either come to an end or presented in a completely different form. It is the party-state who has invited the Gala back to the stage every year. While, in the meanwhile, the unparalleled viewing rate attracts considerable commercial forces. In fact, most commercials before, after and even within the show are masters on motivating the waves of nationalistic sentiment of the night, and gain in both cash and credit. In the past decades, especially the hard advertisements and soft sponsorships planted into the show bombarded the audience of this CCTV show. Prices for commercial spots soared. As one most eye-catching "innovation," the new chief director of 2012 and 2013's CCTV

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<sup>5</sup><http://bbs.ifeng.com/viewthread.php?tid=5925241>



Spring Festival Gala publically announced that she turned down any advertisements or commercial sponsorships within her show, and this gesture as estimated cost CCTV 650 million income in these four and a half hours each year.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4.4.2 Spectacle at Play

Scholars on cultural politics and especially spectacular theory have thoroughly examined how the manipulation and circulation of pageantry and imagery help to normalize and reproduce relations of social and political repression (e.g. Wedeen, 1999, 2008). CCTV's Spring Festival Gala is an excellent example of the spectacular accumulation of appearances of the party-state. Focus on the "production" side in this chapter, I am going to from the perspective of understanding a spectacle, analyze how these performances are caught up in an ideological mechanism and comprise a larger discursive structure.

Let's take a close look into the show to see how the pageantry and imagery produced by and reproduce ideology:

##### 1. Distracts the viewers from engaging in reflective behavior and participatory way of celebration

One character of this night is that "care-free spirit" is upheld: In 1995's Gala, one of the country's most popular singers Xie Xiaodong delivered a song called *Hao Rizhi* (It is a Happy Day!) - "It is a happy day, folks! Isn't it a happy day, folks! Thousands of family, each and every one is saying 'It is a happy day!' Till the New Year's bell is rung, the whole country is immersed in the jubilation!"... The repeated while catchy sentence and quick rhythm clearly promote a specific type of mood, and in the meantime avoid any deep reflections. In 2001, Song Zuying, one of the most officially touted songstresses in Mainland China since the 1990s, sang a similar song accom-

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<sup>6</sup> *Chinese Business Report*, January 10, 2012. See: <http://fun.hsw.cn/system/2012/01/10/051211622.shtml>

panied by group dance called *Yue Lai Yue Hao* (Better and Better): “The house is bigger; the phone is smaller; we feel better and better! We enjoy more vacation and higher income; the work is better and better! The commodity is nicer; the price is lower; we feel better and better! The sky is bluer; the water clearer; the environment is better and better! Ah...better and better...better and better...better and better!” In 2009’s Gala, Cheng Long (Hong Kong), Wang Lihong (Taiwan), Sun Yanzi (Singapore) and Han Hong (the mainland China) together performed another catchy song called “Stand Up!” The lyrics read: “Stand up, Stand up, My love is linked with the mountains, Running gives me purpose, My future has been written down at the starting point, as there is no winner or loser in the finish line. Hey ya...Hey ya...Stand up, Stand up...Stand up...Stand up...”

These assertive eulogies are both self-authored and self-addressed. There is no doubt that these performances do not completely reflect the reality, while although problematic but it is also natural because there is a certain popular psychology associated with the New Year celebration, that is, people’s desire to ring out the old year, enjoy the moment, and pray for good luck in the coming year. Therefore, such practices are “natural” and actually well-accepted as the keynote of CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala. They encourage people to indulge themselves into the dream-like images, for the current moment. While such practices without a doubt depoliticizes people, since it discourages these people from engaging in reflective behavior. Not to mention, people used to celebrate the holiday all by their own, with their family, neighbors, community member, creatively and locally. And the latter, the sense of participatory community, is the basis required for the cultivation of democratic agency.

## **2. Visualize an illusive self-actualization through intensive consumption of appearances**

On this stage, the Gala has tirelessly promoted the images of the revival of Chinese

nation and of “the power and magic of being Chinese.” To be specific, one of the recurring themes on this stage is about the regime’s idealized self-actualization. This kind of illusive self-presentation is always in the tense of future perfection. A great number of performances are aiming at claiming that China is currently thriving in a *Shengshi* (golden age) and will soon achieve the greatest success in human history by following CCP’s leadership sturdily. It can be seen from the early years of the Gala, as in 1985’s stage, Nu Hongxian performed a solo called *Shengshi Ouge Changbuwan* (Cannot Stop Singing Eulogies for the Golden Age). Now, with the significant improvement of the economic capacity and thus the national power, this type of songs never misses one single new year eve. For example, the phrase “*Shengshi*” (golden age) frequents sections’ and episodes’ titles: the 2005’s Gala’s theme is called *Shengshi Da Lianhuan* (The Great Happy Reunion in the Golden Age). In 2008’s Gala, there was the Chinese martial arts performance called *Shengshi Xiongfeng* (The Grant Appearance of the Golden Age). On the 2010’s stage, another chorus was performed called *Shengshi Zhongsheng* (Bell Rung Ushering the Golden Age). Moreover, every year, the Gala will spend a rather big portion of its limited time on showing off Chinese people’s achievements in different international as well as out space arenas. For example, it has been five years in a row that the Chinese astronauts are invited to step on the stage to demonstrate the unprecedented achievement of the national family in the space science. The purpose of all these episodes is trying to translate the success of the national family to the self-actualization of its “children” - as people (performers, invited guests and production crew) chorused in the stadium, right after 2005’s Gala’s new year bell rung: “China, my mother, I am so proud of being your child!”

In the meantime, this “golden age” is said that can only be attained based on political stability and economic prosperity. And on this stage, it is metaphorically repackaged and thus supported by an old Chinese saying, “Harmony in the family is

the basis for success in any undertaking.” To be specific, where this kind of political stability and economic prosperity comes from - an eulogy sung in the 2000’s Gala by a famous military singer Yu Junjian shared with us: “The elders told us that only if the country is protected, then the home is safe; only if the country is strong, then the people is possible to enjoy the promising and wealthy life; and only if the people enjoy the prosperity, then the society is stable and the country is peaceful. . .” (*Shengshi Huange* [Cheerful Song in the Golden Age]). In a word, it is the one-party system guarantees the political stability and then brings in the prosperity. The party-state stands through thick and thin with its people and then it is the “elders” who grant its source of legitimacy.

In fact, the idealized representation of the revived Chinese Nation overshadows ordinary people’ plain and simple pursuits of happiness and blessings at this specific night. While, in this process more or less the viewer’s self-actualization is achieved through identifying with the idealized image of the national family.

### **3. The ubiquitous circulation and arrangement of “family” appearances reproduces and normalizes relationships of domination and exploitation.**

Besides the huge amount of episodes singing for or dancing for “family,” on the 2000’s stage, there was a creative performance, within which the Hong Kong singer Xie Tingfeng “married” the Mainland actress Dong Jie, and turned the “wedding ceremony” into a joint singing performance, called “I will be with you my whole life.” Via the “marriage” to express the bonding relationship is creative while actually not entirely new. Different from this time as a performance, as early as in 1986, a true wedding ceremony was held in that year’s Gala, with Bo Yibo, a Chinese political and military leader, as the chief witness. The bridegroom was a soldier and a war hero in the then China-Vietnam border conflicts, and the bride was a solo singer in Qingdao Troupe of Shandong Province. Bo Yibo said in the staged wedding ceremony, “I am very glad to see you two. Today, on such a grand Spring Festival celebration stage,



**Figure 4.1.** Bo Yibo presented at a true wedding ceremony in 1986's Gala.

you two will become a couple. I am invited to be the chief witness. I am very glad about it. You two, one is soldier guarding the southern border of our motherland, and the other is singer traveling across the motherland. You two come together for the same calling, same goal... that is, to be a couple for the wealth and strength of our motherland. It is truly great. I wish you two make more contribution to your cause, and to the motherland's cause!..." (Figure 4.1)

It was a remarkable scenario. Not only the wedding between these two suggested the combination of the military serviceman and the civilian, between the state apparatus and the people it "protected," but more intriguingly, this wedding ceremony personalized the "national family," and signified how "family" on this stage reproduced and normalized hierarchies. In other words, normally, a wedding ceremony would be held in a single room in front of the family members and friends from both sides of the groom and bride. While in the dramatic performative marriage scenario,

there were no blood-related ancestors at the scene, and all the respects traditionally would be offered to the senior within a family were presented to the state and military authority. It was the guests in the studio and TV viewers across the country who sat there watch and applause. A new family came into being under the auspices of the state (the senior man) in front of the Chinese people in and outside the studio (siblings and friends). It was a magnificent concretion of the national family. By bringing alive the master metaphor of family (Duara, 1996), the center of authority assumed its socio-political power as the senior within the super extend Chinese national family over its people. This material while discursive practice also constructed an opportunity for all the viewers to temporarily suspend the hierarchically structured in each of their daily life, vividly see their collective self and renew the bonds with their spiritually fellow “family members.”

This is also one case that the Chinese Communist Party “spoke” directly to the people through this important channel. This kind of direct address has actually been repeatedly appearing on this stage: As early as in the 1984’s Gala, the then mayor of Tianjin, Li Ruihuan stepped on this stage and thank all the Chinese people for their support with the Luanhe Project. In 1990’s Gala, then President Jiang Zemin and Premier Li Peng walked in the studio right after the New Year’s bell. It is the first Spring Festival after Tiananmen crackdown, a moment that to restore the party-state’s legitimacy became the most urgent matter for CCP. Jiang Zemin also wrote a spring inscription and sent out his New York’s greetings to “all ethnicities of the country and all the overseas Chinese” through the 2000’s Gala. The visual montage of four generations of CCP’s leadership have also repeatedly shown on the background screen located within the studio (2004, 2006, 2009)... In a word, again and again, the centralized “senior” position of the Chinese party-state in the discursive Chinese national family has been constantly staged in the most popular TV show at this traditionally “family”-gathering night.

While intriguingly, any further looking into the Gala will find that the discursive construction of this “national family” is based on the so-called “five-thousand years” of Chinese civilization, not just the over 60-year administration of the CCP. But by the slipperiness of wordings, Chinese Nation, the State and the only ruling Party have been looked at largely as one and the same. Therefore, it becomes no difference between Chinese Nationality and Chinese party-state when talking about people’s sense of belonging flowing towards.

Of course, besides putting the party-state on the “senior man” ’s position in this national family, there are plenty of episodes dedicated to the construction of love and friendship among “family members.” Since the gaps between the urban and the rural, between the rich and the poor increasingly become the primary issue in China, a great deal of time on this stage has been invested into forming a new sense of community and solidarity, trying hard to override the conspicuous socio-economic inequalities in China. This kind of practice certainly depoliticizes socioeconomic conditions, and potentially will paralyze democratic agency.

#### **4. The all-inclusive national family evokes a fantasy of wholeness**

On this ornate stage, great efforts have been made to bring all the essential pieces together to form the symbolic “wholeness” in different senses. For example, in the 1995’s Gala, the well-known hostess Ni Ping presented to the audience - in the studio as well as all over the world - 99 bottles of water that were extracted from various locations of Yellow River at exactly the same time. The aim was to present the “mother river,” as Ni Ping repeatedly emphasized, to all her “kids.” Then the 99 senders of each and every bottle stepped on the stage, briefly introduced themselves with various accents (but still speak the same language), and shook hands with each other. It ended as all the bottles were entrusted to a group of college students from Taiwan. Such a way of representation, in my point of view, carries rich ideological messages. And this kind of symbolic actions certainly performed more than once, in

the 2003's Gala, still hosted by Ni Ping, 34 boxes of soil collected from 31 provinces, autonomous regions, plus Hong Kong, Macao, even Ali Mountain in Taiwan were altogether put in a tripod cauldron. This kind of cauldron used to represent the "weight" and stability of the ancient China. During the show, the giant background screen on the stage kept showing montage images of the soil collection ceremonies held in different parts of the country. Again, in the 2005 gala, 32 local hosts/ hostesses from different provinces as well as Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan presented couplets to the audience. Similarly, in the 2006 gala, hosts/hostesses across the country presented lantern riddles to the audience in the studio as well as in front of the television. Each time they used their different provincial accents to greet New Year to the nationwide audience. In 2000's Gala, right after a similar practice in the opening scene, a powerful tenor sung a song called *Qingxi Zuguo* (Affection Connected to the Motherland). The lyrics were quite expressive: "Mountains extend, waters flow, connections endure, and affections persist. A long blood vein connects us all. In the soil rest our ancestors, thousands of threads are our flesh-blood connections..."

Moreover, this specific night on this stage, under the "reunion" ideology and accompanying with the idealized representation of the revived Chinese nation, the Chinese living in the Mainland China as well as those living overseas including Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau also indicate and embrace each other as "brothers and sisters" within this national family. Equally important in the gala's efforts to present the "wholeness" is to stage the ethnic minorities. Singing and dancing minorities was a staple at every Gala to promote the all-embracing, harmonious "happy multi-ethnic family" image, although the Spring Festival is a traditional Han Chinese festival.<sup>7</sup> In each and every Gala, these ethnic performers wear their traditional costumes, dance to songs sung in different ethnic languages. For example, in 1986's Gala, numerous

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<sup>7</sup>For example, for the Tibetan nationality, January 1 according to the Western calendar is their new year.



vocal solos sang with the accompany of group dances, while the Han viewers can only understand the song *Wushiliu Ge Minzu Tongchang Yishouge* (Fifty-six Nationalities Singing the Same Song) by reading the lyrics: “56 stars, 56 flowers, and 56 ethnic brothers and sisters of one family; 56 ethnic languages saying one thing, loving our China!”

Without a doubt, in these performances, the concept of “wholeness” of the national family is played out, realized and visualized, and this stage at the moment served as the very spot of recognition and reunion. The “family” metaphor here overrides any “inharmonic” possibility of symbolic totality. All the inconvenient facts have been either covered, or assimilated and integrated into the comprehensive image provided by the official discourse.

Similar situations can be recalled from the 1930s and 40s’s Europe: Nazis and Italian fascists tirelessly circulated signs of hyper-nationalism and images that represent national and spiritual cohesion. Examples can be found in tons of spectacularly constructed monuments, parades, rallies, and propaganda films. Political ideological fantasy is often appeared as the longing for certain kind of “wholeness,” especially in a rapid-changing, fragmented and chaotic world. CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala, as a spectacle, exhibits the way how huge amount of deliberately circulated and arranged pageantry and imagery visualize this kind of ideological fantasy.

## 4.5 Summing Up

From the above analysis, it is clear that CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala is a carefully constructed ornate show. It is a spectacle that aims at “domesticating” the subjects as many as possible under the roof of Chinese nation. This night, Chinese at home and abroad, which means beyond the definition based on geography or politics, are called upon to join in the one and only happy gathering, because they are all offspring of the same ancestors and thus share the same blood ties. It is the CCTV’s Spring Festival

Gala that borrows the magic power of modern communication channel to uplift the ceremony of families to the “national family” level. Every year on this screen, the essentialized collective “ourselves” and fraternity is enacted and experiences through the entertainment show. In so doing, it harmonizes or at least tries to harmonize various conflicts and contradictions nowadays Chinese society is facing. As a result, in an unprecedented direct and official way, the Chinese “national family” is laid out. Using Bin Zhao’s words (1998, p.46), “the ancient Confucian ‘great oneness’ ideal of the state governed like one family suddenly appears more real than ever.”

This ornate grand show begs the question of not only how the party-state speaks to its people but more importantly the kinds of subjects that are made possible or impossible by such an address. In other words, such a spectacle tries to normalize political and social positions of power, while its efficacy requires a certain level of commitment from the spectators. If psychologically the spectators recognize and accept a smooth, totalized sense of identity from the interpellation, the essential diversity in political thinking in and out everyday life would be foreclosed, as people may appear less likely to come up with alternative possibilities against the *status quo*. While I believe that where there is an interpellation, there might be an attempt to escape, if not resist. For example, ever since the CCP took the power, the conception and ideal of the extended family has been ruthlessly afflicted. Right now, the re-adoption and promotion of this giant-national-family idea based on the extended family tradition “breaks the restraining hold of nationalist history and its frozen past upon our political imaginations” (Gilroy, 2000, p.8). The imagery of the Chinese national family isn’t established as secure as the Gala claims. Therefore, plural “negotiated readings” do exist. In my mind, the study of political agency is an indispensable part in a study about the spectacle, and identifying and describing the “negotiation” process, as an important daily exercise in a post-totalitarian society, is the focus of my next chapter.

## CHAPTER 5

### RESISTANCE AND BEYOND

*If there is no exit from the political world, then political silence must be as active and colorful as a bright summer shadow.*

—Nina Eliasoph (1998, p.6)

*Again and again what we have to observe is in effect a pre-emergence, active and pressing but not yet fully articulated, rather than the evident emergence which could be more confidently named.*

—Raymond Williams (1977, p.126); emphasis in the original

#### 5.1 Preamble

This chapter addresses the issue of the reception. After witnessed a series of unprecedented economic and political transformations in the recent thirty years, most of Chinese people have acquired a more critical awareness of the party-state's ideological mechanism. As a result, the government has encountered more difficulties in carrying out its ideological operation. However, as a cultural production of ideological reinforcement, if not a pure propaganda or even brainwash, CCTV's Spring Festival Gala maintains very popular among Chinese audience, bringing in considerable percentage of CCTV's annual commercial revenue. Why? That is the first and foremost intriguing question I try to answer in this chapter. In the meanwhile, I would assert that the party-state's direct intention is still largely futile, given there are tremendous voices that have questioned, challenged and even ridiculed its ideological attempt.

## 5.2 The Development of Individual Subjectivity in the Contemporary China

### 5.2.1 The Plural “People”/ “Masses”

The absence of individual agency has a history in China. What pervaded the modern Chinese history, on the one hand, was the “people” or the “masses” as the mobilized revolutionary forces and the basis of the regime’s legitimacy; on the other hand, even Mao, the sturdy advocator of the peasants’ revolutionary determination and energy, proposed a series of mass education campaigns in order to transform the unenlightened masses into new socialist laborers to fully participate in the national project of modernity.

To be specific, as we have already known that since the 1910s, the modern reformers promoted the new political imaginary about “conjugal family” by supporting individual rights. But it was ultimately a means to national survival and strength as argued; individual development and fulfillment per se had never become an end in itself. In the following Republican years, the nationalist elites regarded the masses as incapable of fulfilling their political responsibilities, therefore there was the need of a strong central government to lead the uneducated, uncivilized people into disciplinary practices. But the nationalist project was repeatedly interrupted and eventually stranded because of decades of wars under its administration. Later on, as we know that the reformers and revolutionaries from the Marxist tradition believed in the masses - “the people” were regarded as the fundamental support to the social development. Mao, for example, although he viewed the masses sometimes ambivalently, he never hesitated to emphasize and motivate the potentials of the subjectivity of the masses.

While, to make it clear, what Mao emphasized was the collective subjectivity in the name of the individual subjectivity in order to build the collective objectives. As discussed in Chapter 2, under the radical socialism, in the countryside, the party-state

tried to shift the peasants' loyalty from the family to the collectives and ultimately to the state. Yunxiang Yan (2003) discovers that the individualism rising from this national project as in the process the old social and family hierarchies were destroyed and peasants were transformed from loyal family members into individual citizens. Nevertheless, Yan continues to warn that it did not necessarily an intentional goal of the party-state and there was no new space opened up for the individual-centered development. Instead, during the collective period, "all public activities were sponsored and organized by the collectives, and the new sociality invariably bore the imprint of the official ideology of the socialist state, emphasizing the submission of individuals to an officially endorsed collectivity" (2003, p.233).

To define "plurality" as the basic and sole human condition is clearly a symbolic violence, while it is not less "real" for being symbolic. To some extent, the Cultural Revolution can be seen as an extremely negative case of the collective subjectivity grew to an uncontrollable extent.

### **5.2.2 The New Generation of "Consumers"**

In the pre-reform era, the party-state was the monopolized supplier and allocator of any tangible or intangible goods. Moreover, the zeal during the Mao's era to build a brand new socialist nation cum "socialist communal family" under the equalitarian ideology contributed to "an impoverishment of everyday life" (Tang, 2000). Under such circumstances, most personal material desires were either regarded as inappropriate or tightly controlled.

Then as discussed in Chapter 3, after the three-decade radical socialism, in the so-called "New Era," that is even before the events of 1989, it was quite evident that the party was going through a period of intense self-reflection in response to its deteriorating relationship with the masses. Then after the famous spring of 1989, as Ann Anagnost (1997) reports that in the aftermath of the crackdown the problems

of the relationship between the party and the masses whom it claimed to represent became a more critical issue. Therefore, as we know as a response the party-state on the one hand keeps claiming that the people are unready for the overall democratizing process, on the other hand speeds up the economic reforms. As a result, there is the rise of new kinds of economic actors, the new generation of “consumers,” who although have little power in the strict political sense, start to negotiate with the government in a subtle but significant process. After closely read the film *The Story of Qiu Ju* as an allegory about the emergence of individual agency in reform-era China, Ann Anagnost (1997) points out that “surely we must recognize the presence of the marketplace as an enabling, but perhaps not sufficient, ‘cause’” (p.157). Indeed, ever since the party-state overturned its original attitude towards the market and reduced its overwhelming control over the flow of commodities, the individual Chinese, for the first time in the history, through their limited buying power, acquired a certain sense of personal control when made their personal decisions. Especially for the generation growing up and completing socialization under the market economy, their life experiences are surrounded by commercial promotions rather than old political campaigns, and they are no longer afraid of expressing their personal desires for a “good” life at least in the materialistic sense.

### **5.2.3 The Gap between Performance and Subjectivity in the Post-Totalitarian Era**

During totalitarian era, we all know about the danger of expressing unbelief even just among one’s few trusted friends in a private setting. In fact, for about three decades since the establishment of RPC, Chinese people indeed had the blind faith in Maoism, until it led to the catastrophic Cultural Revolution.

Now in the post-totalitarian age, Ann Anagnost (1997) observes that many public political sceneries that involve the ordinary people’s participation show the increas-

ingly obvious gap between “performance” and “subjectivity,” where the uncoerced compliance is suspected and also where the limits of power are implicitly acknowledged - For individual, “this awareness of one’s own duplicitous participation in the play of appearances is in itself a passive recognition of the truth” (p.114).

In his thought-provoking book-length essay *Power of the Powerless* (1985), Vaclav Havel provides a profound intellectual endeavor to analyze how the rulers and the ruled in the post-totalitarian Romania, acted as if the society were still faithful to its Marxist commitment to build a just society of equals, but both were aware that they were sustaining a lie. As a result, ordinary people were still willing to subject themselves to the symbolic order of the party because, in his words, that “I know what I must do. I behave in the manner expected of me. I can be depended upon and am beyond reproach. I am obedient and therefore I have the right to be left in peace” (p.42).

The latent reason is that people decide whether to obey or to rebel is based on what they think others will do. Then the shared practices of public dissimulation - from posting signs on shop’s windows to cheering for public spectacles - isolate people from one another by making it difficult for them to speak frankly in public and thus to trust each other and form new public relationship. In this process, people may not only “perform” greater loyalty than they feel, but may also beneath the surface develop a greater sense of cynicism and apathy. Havel expounds that this kind of complicity is of great danger because the ordinary people “thus ‘confirm the system, fulfill the system, make the system, are the system’” (p.45). Havel continues to comment on the situation as “everyone in his or her own way is both a victim and a supporter of the system” (p.53).

Havel concludes his essay by calling people to down-play strictly political activities while choose a strategy he believes will be more fruitful in the end: cultivating the “sphere of truth” within individuals, hoping that as this hidden sphere grows, it will

become an irresistible force that eventually change the society. “Living in the truth” emphasizes on returning the focus of struggle from the state to the individual level; or using Havel’s own words, “It seems to me that today, this ‘provisional,’ ‘minimal’ and ‘negative’ program - the ‘simple’ defense of people - is in a particular sense (and not merely in the circumstances in which we live) an optimal and most positive program because it forces politics to return to its only proper starting point, proper that is, if all the old mistakes are to be avoided: individual people” (p.68).

History confirms Havel’s proposal: in the early 1990s right after the Tian’anmen crackdown, the communist systems were overturned first in the Eastern Europe, and then the Soviet Union as well. It was primarily a voluntary choice of people in those countries, who finally decided to stop telling the “lie” and discard the whole system that was sustaining it.

Currently, even though China still claims to be a communist country in the “primitive stage of socialism,” as we have argued that communism in China has lost the majority of adherents who genuinely believed in the values and ideas the system claims. As China is transferring to the post-totalitarianism as Havel describes, free spaces can be found in various social settings where people may have the room to own their own socio-political thoughts and where self-provoking norms and principles are in operation. For one, in the socialist China, quiet refusal to play used to be as dangerous as active resistance, while now it is becoming commonplace act.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Hu Shih once commented on the different situations of “speech freedom” under the Republican administration and the Communist regime: under the former one, “You have no freedom to speak,” while under the later, “You have no freedom to NOT speak.” Now, the situation is changed.



## **5.3 In Search of the Voices of the Ordinary People**

### **5.3.1 Contestations on Althusser's Absolute Power of Interpellation in Media Studies**

In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (1971), Louis Althusser’s notion of “interpellation” leaves no room for the subjects to actively and critically engage in any forms of resistance towards the ideology produced through the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), and we know the mass media are crucial components of the ISAs. The theory of interpellation has inspired many traditional Marxist media scholars who tend to use it to explain the overwhelming power of mass media. For example, Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake (1988) describe in traditional film criticism how a film is regarded “as a pre-existing structure. . . interpellates the spectator, so constituting him/her as a subject” (p.12). David Gauntlett (2002) describes in plain words how “interpellation occurs when a person connects with a media text: when we enjoy a magazine or TV show, for example, this uncritical consumption means that the text has interpellated us into a certain set of assumptions, and caused us to tacitly accept a particular approach to the world” (p.27). For decades, in the traditional school, no emphasis had been put on the active role of the audience, that is, the actual use of various media text by different groups of people.

However, if we see that people who lived under Mao’s Communist China confirms Althusser’s understanding that as subjects who had always already locked into the subject position; while in Havel’s post-totalitarian Romania, we read about a different story, which, as presented in the previous discussion, is also running in the contemporary China, where the ideological system itself now is full of cracks and leaks. Under such circumstances, the ISAs are no longer completely coherent since the production is not determined by a singular force as before the reform. As a result, multiple and even alternative understandings are seen common among the ordinary audience.

In fact, there are plenty of later theorists who insist on recognizing the agency of the subjects. For example, Slavoj Žižek (1989) believes that Althusser's analysis lacking in the discussion of the free individual, the individual that is not always "abstract" with respect to the subject which he always already is. To be more concrete, Terry Eagleton (Eagleton, 2004) criticizes that Althusser overrode the fact that a person's multiple identities do not necessarily coexist in harmony. From another perspective, Lapsley and Westlake (1988) also argue that the ISAs are not always completely cogent and effective.

Therefore, the issue of the formation of human subjectivity has drawn more attention with new theoretical developments. Among different theoretical strands, the institutionalization and development of cultural studies has contributed a lot to a comprehensive understanding of the audience.

### **5.3.2 Bring the "Active" Audience in**

Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies also known as Birmingham School of cultural studies emphasizes that the audience are active producers of meanings through largely differential media consumption and interpretations. As a major figure in this school, Stuart Hall expounds that although the mass media do encode meanings that intend to serve the best interest of the ruling class, they are also "a field of ideological struggle" (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978, p. 220), where the audience can based on their concrete lived and living experiences actively decode the mass media texts.

In his famous theoretical account of messages' "encoding and decoding" process (1993), Hall argues that there are three different kinds of readings: "dominant readings," "negotiated readings" and "oppositional readings." He suggests that although the preferred meanings can be encoded in the mass media texts by the dominant forces, the polysemic nature of the texts makes possible negotiated and op-

positional readings by the audience. Although Hall agrees that “the codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical” (p.4), he insists that the meaning of a text is always located somewhere between the production institution and the audience.

Following Hall, a huge body of empirical studies emerged (Ang, 1985; Bird, 2003; Jhally & Lewis, 1992; Liebes & Katz, 1991; Lull, 1991; Modleski, 1984; Morley, 1980, 1986; Radway, 1984, etc.). Most of them focus on the active, negotiated if not oppositional readings. Michel de Certeau (1984) reveals the subordinate groups’ creative “tactics” of resistance against the top-down “strategies” in “making do” with the products and commodities of a capitalist system. de Certeau’s “optimism” in the oppositional potential of the audience later was further exaggerated and romanticized to be a celebration of an unlimited subjectivity in John Fiske’s work (1989a, 1989b). This kind of “over-optimist” work was widely criticized from the perspectives that believe it fails to take the structural constraints into the consideration (Clarke, 1990), or did not recognize the crucial necessity of alternative social organizations in order to achieve the true political importance (Budd, Entman, & Steinman, 1990).

Taking the structural constraints and also the potential of alternative social organizations into consideration, Diana C. Mutz (1998) once suggests that mass media content constitutes by far the most systematic, constant, and steady source of information about the social environment outside the domain of people’s life environment. According to Mutz, some areas in communication domain such as agenda setting, priming, risk perception, cultivation, and political learning, have demonstrated the media’s cognitive effects to influence audience’s perceptions of collective reality. Nevertheless, as James Lull (1991) particularly points out in his ethnographic research on Chinese television industry and audience that there are multiple visions, intentions and preferences within the TV station itself when entering the market economy. The resulting confusing if not contradictory representations and inefficiency in re-

porting turn the Chinese audience into searching for new information sources from alternative channels and produced radical new ways of thinking and interpreting. In other words, in the radical changing environment, besides mass media, the informal communication is also becoming an indispensable part of an information environment

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## **5.4 The Channels of “Private” Voices in Public**

### **5.4.1 The Importance of Informal Channels of Communication**

The recognition of the importance of informal channels of communication is originated from Lazarsfeld and his colleagues’ influential work *The People’s Choice* (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948), in which researchers postulate the theory of “two-step-flow communication” that establishes initial awareness of the significance of interpersonal communication. Lowery and DeFleur (1995) point out, “The significance of personal influence was not realized until the study was well under way” (p.89). According to the theory, ideas often first flow from mass media to the opinion leaders and then from them to the “less active sections of the population” (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948, p.151).

Subsequent researchers (e.g. Chaffee, 1982; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Miller, 1945; Mutz, 1998; Schramm, 1973) in the domain of communication also demonstrate that interpersonal communication not only can achieve greater audience coverage than the mass communication does, but also can alter the effects of mass media messages. For instance, in Miller’s study of the news of Roosevelt’s death (1945), informants who learned from the radio told, on the average, seven persons, and those who learned by word-of-mouth further told, on the average, 1.4 persons. Studies on audiences’ crime perceptions also suggest that interpersonal communication plays a significant role “either in reinforcing the media-induced images or attenuating them” (Guo, Zhu, & Chen, 2001, p.402).

To the diffusion of some kinds of information, interpersonal communication plays a more important role than the mass communication does. Hill and Bonjean (1964) points out that, the greater the news value of an event, the more important will be interpersonal communication in the diffusion process. Prior research has demonstrated that when information that is “shock” or of near epic or crisis proportion is being transmitted, interpersonal channel appears to be very powerful (Adams, Mullen, & Wilsin, 1969; Fathi, 1973; Gantz, Trenholm, & Pittman, 1976; Gantz, 1983; Troidahl & Van Dam, 1965; Haroldsen & Harvey, 1979). Early research on the diffusion of news discovers that some events such as assassinations and natural disasters become known to the public mainly through word of mouth (e.g. Greenberg, 1964). For instance, when studying the diffusion of news of the Kennedy Assassination, Banta (1964) has found 76 percent of respondents learn the news through interpersonal channel. Greenberg (1964) finds that among the later knowers, who are slow in finding out about any aspects of the assassination, 68% percent of them obtain their information from another person, which means that personal transfer of information predominates over media transfer of information for the majority of the late knowers. Also, with respect to learning novel information, interpersonal communication has also been found significant (e.g. J. P. Robinson et al., 1986; Rogers, 1983; J. P. Robinson, 1976; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Huckfeldt, Beck, Dalton, Levine, & Morgan, 1998). And compared with mass media communication, informal communication channels are, as Mutz (1998) claims, prone to influence personal-level judgments. For instance, prior researchers (Antonovsky & Anson, 1976; Kunreuther, 1978), suggest that interpersonal discussions can contribute to altering personal health-related attitudes and behaviors such as seatbelt and contraceptive use.

Furthermore, interpersonal communication can be acted as a counterweight or even can be a buffer against the mass media messages. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) claim that when information is flowed from mass media to interpersonal networks, it

will be contextualized and reinforced by opinion leaders. Some researchers (Atwater, Salwen, & Anderson, 1985; Erbring, Goldenberg, & Miller, 1980; Lenart, 1994) suggest that once media messages are diffused within interpersonal networks, they will be qualified and better understood. Moreover, since interpersonal communication is frequently perceived as non-purposive in a propaganda sense, compared with formal mass media, interpersonal communication seems more effective and persuasive.

In addition, some researchers suggest that interpersonal communication sometimes functions as a buffer against media's framing on some certain issues. Through his research on the 1988 Canadian election campaign, Lenart (1994) discovers that interpersonal communication has a counterbalancing effect on media messages. Issues highly framed by mass media have been surprisingly ignored by the interpersonal communication, while some issues that are ignored by the media coverage are highlighted through the interpersonal communication. Mendelsohn (1996) also indicates that mass communication and interpersonal communication may pull in opposite directions. He points out that "while the media frame campaigns through the character of leaders, interpersonal communications may focus on issues" (p.121).

#### **5.4.2 The Importance of Informal Communication in the (Post)totalitarian Context**

The similar importance of informal communication also has been empirically demonstrated in China, former USSR and European countries where socialist systems are/were in the predominating position (e.g. Hollander, 1972; Ling, 1989; Remington, 1981; Whyte, 1979). A survey done in the end of 1960s in USSR indicates that 18.5 percent of the respondents receive information from conversation with co-workers; 19.8 percent from relatives and acquaintances, and 80.3 percent from the media (cited from Remington, 1981). Studies on Eastern European audience also suggest that use of word-of-mouth for news acquisition is very commonly adopted by those at

the bottom of the social hierarchy, but also by those among the most educated and privileged strata (Blumstock, 1977; G. J. Robinson, 1977). Under the circumstances of Chinese mass media mediated information environment as discussed in Chapter 3, it is also reasonable for Chinese audience to seek other informal channels of communication for information. Even before the Internet took off in China in the middle of the 1990s, Yu and Liu's (1995) study shows that 23.4 percent of the respondents take informal networks as their initial sources of information to shape their ideas on politics, economy, and social lives in China. Ling's (1989) study on mainland China immigrants' perceptions on Hong Kong indicates that informal communication such as talking to or writing to relatives and friends is the most important source to foster their perceptions on Hong Kong, and also those immigrants put their faith in information gained from interpersonal communication rather than in information gained from official media organizations.

Studies on Chinese media system (Chu, 1978, 1979a, 1979b; Chu & Hsu, 1983; Ling, 1989; Whyte, 1979) also indicate that there are special communication networks that act as a supplementary mode of the diffusion of information, which is called "Political Study Groups" (*zhengzhi xuexi xiaozu*). Whyte (1979) regards it as "an organizational innovation of the Chinese Communists" (p.114) and the "strong and effective political infrastructure that the Chinese Communists have built" (p.116).

Whyte (1979) addresses that the so-called "Political Study Groups" plays a number of important role in the Chinese political system. According to his point of view, firstly, "Political Study Groups" is a part of the system of downward communication, and it contributes to "providing a regular verbal mechanism for reinforcing communications coming down the official media" (p.115). Secondly, "Political Study Groups" contributes not only to making the public further understand the government's policies and political goals, but also to persuading the public to make efforts to achieve the government's goals. Thirdly, the small group networks have successfully connect-

ed the central government with the public, which embodies the Chinese official mass line leadership style “from the masses, to the masses.” On the one hand, the government’s intentions can be attenuated, while at the same time, reinforced effectively through the small groups; on the other hand, the public’s state also can be reflected through the small group networks to some degree.

A typical example that indicates the flourishing of the informal communication channels in China is the pervasiveness of rumors (*Xiaodao Xiaoxi*). It is said that there are various rumors diffused in Chinese populace. The topics of the rumors cover almost all areas of social lives in China, especially concerning Chinese political figures and affairs. Remington (1981) points out, “Rumor conveys both accurate and inaccurate news, sometimes contradicting published reports, sometimes filling a vacuum” (p.815). Therefore, the pervasiveness of rumors reflects the attitudes that the public holds towards official media information. In other words, factors such as the insufficiencies and inaccuracy of office media messages stimulate audiences to seek and accept communication from other channels. Moreover, it has been demonstrated that informal channels of communication can play a significant role in further interpreting media messages and in altering individuals’ original attitudes.

However, although informal communication channels do contribute to the diffusion of information, they appear to be more diverse than official media sources, and difficult to be statistically “measured” in the quantitative researchers’ eyes. For instance, prior researchers have found that it is very difficult to induce experimentally the amount of pure oral diffusion of a message as in a controlled study of rumor (Festinger et al., 1948; Dodd, 1951). Meanwhile, Lin (1973) claims that the blurriness of the definition of “opinion leaders” makes the operationalization of the concept much more difficult. Therefore, my research will be qualitative in nature and in fact, particularly, Internet can facilitate this research since the opinion leaders in the cyberspace is relatively easier to locate through personal network (Kendall, 1999). Moreover, if as Mutz (1998)



argues that a decade ago, with respect to social-level judgment, interpersonal channels of communication can hardly play roles and mass communication is significantly contributing when considering judgments specific to large-scale collectives, the situation is significantly changed today, almost changed single-handed by the booming Internet.

### **5.4.3 The Booming New “Citizen” Medium - the Internet**

#### The General Picture

China has been the world leader on the Internet industry. Internet as a booming new medium without boundaries has lately played an increasingly important role in reshaping the Chinese information environment (even the boundary between “mass” and “interpersonal” communication channels), but also is penetrating further into Chinese public and private life.

In the earlier days, Internet in China was mostly limited to academic or governmental use. Until January 1995, China Telecom started to provide Internet service to the general public via telephone lines. In November 1997, China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) published the first China Internet Development Report, claiming that by October 31, 1997, there were 620,000 Internet users in China. 15 years later, specifically up to the end of 2012, the number of Internet users in China has reached 564 million.

Nowadays, for the growing population, an understanding of this new social technology has become not only a desirable skill, but a basic requirement to live and communicate. Every day the society is becoming more connected and complicated. Indeed, Internet has tremendously changed the landscape of everyday life in Chinese society. From the academic perspective, the impact has begun to cover the areas from psychology to cultural studies and to sociology. Particularly interesting to me, when the Internet first emerged as a significant technology in the 1990s, many Western

scholars optimistically predicted that it would be a potent liberatory force for political change, but a decade later, as we can see, authoritarian regimes endure. Some of them, like the one in China, appear to be good at using this new technology to their own advantages (for the detailed “preemptive” strategies of the Chinese government, see Zhou, 2006). Internet empowers the ruled and at the same time also act as the able helper of the ruler - It isn’t (never is) the technology itself strengthens the fundamental social changes, nor technology is the only factor to change human behaviors, which is actually a much more complicated and therefore slow process.

#### From the “Liberatory” Medium to a Social Medium of “Commitment”

For me, Internet, the new technology (the same as the once “new” technology - television), has been emphasized too much on what its physical features may bring to people. Regarding my specific question, I will not solely emphasize the promise it delivers as a medium through which people can access “free” and “limitless” information. Actually, the torrents of speedy information flow (Gitlin, 2001) baffle people’s understanding of the information. For one, regarding the ability of message comprehension, it becomes more and more difficult for the individuals to grasp, memorize and recall some “factual knowledge” such as “when,” “what,” “who,” and “where” that are contained in a given message published online due to its ephemeral and hyperlinking nature. In this study, I move the focus from the “liberatory” role of Internet to reveal it as a social medium of “commitment;” to be specific, to capture its role in sustaining communities and loose social networks, in improving basic understanding of politics in relation to themselves, and particularly in motivating to participate. The nature of this social medium makes it a fertile site for the critical approach to these topics.

Particularly, Yunxiang Yan (2003) argues that in the post-collectivism years in China “the most important unintended consequence deserving our close attention. . . is the rise of the individual” (p.220). And he continues to claim that the “feature

of the rising individuality is a willingness and ability to express personal opinions (p.221). When this new change step into the Internet era, a bottom-up social reform is happening with people's genuine discussion and deliberation of public issues in the semi-private arena. It is more than what Ien Ang (1985) describes when talking about people's everyday interpretation of the television message as a form of representation-al practice, "the power to interrupt, to trouble, to intervene tactically rather than strategically in the interrogation of dominant discourses" (p.2); It can be a private sphere established in public, an alternative space which connects people who were "atomized" by their public compliance, through a far-reaching shared recognition of their genuine beliefs and even forming the true beliefs together. To put it plainly, it carves out a space for people to interact with each other, rationally as well as emotionally, which may or may not directly relate to political expression and participation, but it is possible that a new political subjectivity may rise in this virtual space. It is what Nick Couldry promoted in his "Actor Network Theory" (2008). Concretely, I think Internet plays its special role as virtually "interpretive communities" (Fish, 1980) as well as "communities of sentiment" (Steiner, 1983):

### **Interpretive Communities**

As we all know that the accessibility and openness of Internet as a simple self-publishing tool provokes its users to produce and speak out their own definitions, visions, ideals, and frustrations. These people who write in the cyberspace just like give a public talk in front of a potentially big group of people, where there are friends, proponents, opponents, and total strangers. There never lacks of conflicts, especially in those political forums. Fearing being criticized and embarrassed, the author must compose his writings through careful composition. This kind of expression may also be more genuine in the sense that the person likes them and wants to identify with them. The implication is that when the user speaks to the other fellow netizens, he is no longer "performing" but is expressing his/her true thoughts. As a result, a

reputation of “veracity” of Chinese cyberspace is commonly recognized and cherished together by the netizens.

Moreover, when one lacks solid confidence on an issue or the way to present the issue, it is understandable that the person will adjust his or her beliefs by relying on trusted others’ knowledge or persuasiveness, that is to say, subjected his beliefs to interdependent change. In this process, the technologically advanced communication channels play an important role to carry the “choral support” (Volosinov, 1986, p.33) from others, which without a doubt encourages politically incendiary ideas circulated and further plays a far-reaching “cultivation” role to the conditions conducive to critical engagement even under the authoritarian power.

Furthermore, “to what extent do the signs of transgression amount to political resistance?” is a question with fast-changing, flowing answer. Through these practices, the people reexamine everyday that what can or cannot be said in public. That is, it operates everyday to touch and re-mark the boundaries of official tolerated criticism through online public-minded concerns and discussions. It is exactly what James C. Scott (1992) encourages: to search and probe the “limits of the possible” in an “empirical process” (p.193). It is the “pre-political” Havel calls for that encompasses all kinds of small gestures of resistances in everyday life and eventually will lead to the real change.

### **Communities of Sentiment**

Also Chinese cyberspace as a site of creative collaboration is indeed both shared and enriched by the self-devoted interaction. Participants cherish these spaces and strive for communal interests. On the production side, the well-known or anonymous contributors all volunteered their work. On the reception side, although the idealized “universality” of cyberspace is in fact too rosy to realize, one cannot overlook the enthralling power of the web that connects the disparate, transient, and anonymous people to decipher the information environment they all live within from complex

layers, and then share or/and debate with each other immediately. They are literally embedded discussions, which usually lead to deep self-revelation and self-reflection. Partly as a result, it is a space frequently teemed with unrestrained expression of hope, enthusiasm, unity, happiness, joy, or sorrow, anger, worry. . . . Indeed, any cursory surfing in Chinese cyberspace could be an emotionally intense experience. A sense of belonging and genuine satisfaction is common.

To sum up, it seems that the whole set of phenomena do not fully get along with what Habermas describes as the essence of “public sphere” - individuals engage “in rational and critical public discussions that formed the basis for a ‘public opinion’ ” (1991, p.398); but I believe that the reflexive, mediated and deliberative daily practices among a broader public are inherently democratic and has the potential to brew the new political subjectivity in China.

## 5.5 The Methods to Approach Individual Audience

Fairclough and Wodak (1997) argue that hegemony occurs when differing and competing ideologies struggle for dominance, resulting in negotiations of meaning where one particular meaning gains prominence. Even within existing unequal relations of power, people have the ability to use different ideologies as resources to create new formations of discourses. To fully explore the discursive construction and collective imagination of the united and unitary “family” in contemporary China, we should not only look at a particular practice from top-down, but also learn about the reactions among the audience. Indeed, as collective imagination requires popular participation, this “family” creates a complex and contested space in which the Chinese party-state stands at one end, and Chinese individuals at home or abroad at the other. The latter are either attracted or affected by the show to various degrees, in the meantime, never stop seeking to gain their own ground with various *tactics* to cope with the party-state’s *strategies* (de Certeau, 1984).

With this in mind, I tried my best to approach the individual actual audience. Here, regarding my fundamental interest in people's political awareness and subjectivity, there is a tradition that the researchers have employed survey strategies to evaluate relevant concepts (e.g. Guo, 1996; Zaller, 1992). By virtue of questioning responses, researchers have gained information about individuals' general or specific political knowledge, political interest, as well as cognitive capacity. However, as a psychological phenomenon in an authoritarian environment, political subjectivity is a far more complex (thus, intriguing) story. Ethnographic methods will be more contributing in this particular context. And the emerging social media is the virtual community for me to get into, observe and understand. Therefore, the methods I utilized to approach audience aiming at letting the researcher get into the community and interact with its members. In this process, I myself was the primary research instrument for the embedded knowledge (Lincoln, 1985).

Particularly, I presented voices from ordinary Chinese to reveal how the galas was gradually accepted as one primary activity in their Spring Festival celebration as well as how the collective family has been continued to incorporate into their cultural and political imagination, especially how they identified with the big family called "Chinese Nation" presented on the CCTV galas. I collected these voices through participant observation and In-depth interview:

### **5.5.1 Participant Observation**

I conducted online participant observations of netizens' viewing experiences of the CCTV's 2012, 2013 and 2014 Spring Festival Gala. Bishop (1999) expounds that ethnographic inquiry, in nature, should be "holistic and naturalistic" (p.13). It aims at a kind of "thick description" (Geertz, 1973). According to Clifford Geertz, human beings are intertwined in the cultural "webs of significance" and thus any analyses of culture should be an interpretive process to search for meaning. It requires

the investigator to engage and even immerse herself/himself into a culture's routine practices and experiences, to see the continuous and competing construction and reconstruction of its cultural realities by its members.

In earlier times, when the investigator entered a community to study its culture, he/she usually stayed and interacted with local people for a fairly long period of time. That is how the participant observation, kind of the “spirit” of ethnography, has been done. Nowadays, the tremendously hyperlinking and constantly changing world of Internet has become a different sort of field site than what the traditional ethnographic researchers will typically face. Nevertheless, once again, let's go back to Geertz, whose influential point of view about culture is “webs of significance” is actually quite “Internet-friendly” - He argued that “one can start anywhere in a culture's repertoire of forms and end up anywhere else... only to learn how to gain access to them” (1973, p.453), which does sound quite congenial with the new Internet environment.

In practice, I spent the three evenings<sup>2</sup> - the Spring Festival eve of 2012 (January 22), of 2013 (February 9) and of 2014 (January 30) - participating and observing the instant online discussions about the ongoing CCTV's Gala of 2012, 2013 and 2014, while watching the Gala at the same time (I re-visited each show many times afterwards as well). The CCTV.com, the No.1 Chinese online community “tianya.com” (the biggest Chinese online community; literally “faraway place”) and one of the biggest overseas Chinese website “huaren.us” all held specific “discussion boards” to allow the Gala viewers to comment and instantly exchange opinions during the four and a half hours when the Gala was on. There were a huge number of various instant responses and exchanges between netizens. For example, each year the most popular

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<sup>2</sup>I was in China in the early spring of 2012; but I spent the two following years' spring festivals here in the United States. So, technically, they were one evening and two mornings - due to different time zones.

and relevant post on tianya.com gathered people together and respectively generated 2,027,565 hits and 23,584 responses in 2012,<sup>3</sup> 1,476,182 hits and 21,337 responses in 2013,<sup>4</sup> and 1,517,488 hits and 18,774 responses in 2014.<sup>5</sup> There were also plenty of in-depth commentary or review articles shown up in the following several weeks. Some particularly controversial or provoking ones attracted tons of responses. It is a way to seek long-term embedded information and reflections; I believe these are ideas, feelings, and observations that are more contextualized in their everyday life. I observed closely about what “interesting” happened during the specific four and a half hours as well as afterwards of the respective year. To be specific, I tried to reveal what topics of the shows people were more willing to identify with while what topics they tended to reject? On what ground? And with what implications? “Family” of course is the focus of my observation and exploration. In the meanwhile, I copied and saved as many as possible thoughtful pieces and casual messages appeared in the virtual communities.

### 5.5.2 In-depth Interview

I also planned to capture people’s more thoughtful and responsible “subjective experiences and attitudes” (Perakyla & Ruusuvuori, 2005, p.351). To gather this kind of information, in-depth interview is necessary. In addition, interview allows the interviewer to build rapport and earn the trust of the interviewees (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The information derived from the interview technique may therefore provide insights not obtainable from other large-scale inquiries. And this is also particularly valuable for collecting non-official voices under authoritarian circumstances.

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<sup>3</sup><http://www.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/funinfo/1/3072059.shtml>

<sup>4</sup><http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-funinfo-3937110-1.shtml>

<sup>5</sup><http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-funinfo-5004027-1.shtml>



In particular, I employed in-depth interviews to explicate people's diverse interpretations of the officially promoted familial imagination on the CCTV galas. I drew on in total a pool of 18 interviewees (9 female and 9 male) through a network and purposive selection process (LeCompte, Preissle, & Tesch, 1993). Twelve interviewees were recruited in the middle of January 2012, 3 in the January 2013 and 3 in February 2014. Comparing with the responses and insights garnered from the cyberspace, the group of interviewees were beneficial to the research because it helped me find more complex and diversified impacts from other social members, most of them due to the education, income or age were not Internet buff.

The detailed Interview steps as follow:

#### Target Population and Recruitment

I asked my family, acquaintances, especially college professors and classmates who were working at different media organizations to recommend their friends, relatives, co-workers, informants and the like to participate in this research project. These people have extensive experiences in their respective communities, and their working networks may allow me to diversify my interviewees on purpose.

Through this informal but purposive network, I selected 18 interviewees who first of all were regular viewers of the galas. In the process, I made every effort to balance other variables such as gender, age, birthplace, educational background, economic status, occupations, etc. In other words, the collection of the interviewee pool was designed to reduce the selection bias of the sample.

Twelve interviews were conducted around and mainly after the 2012's Spring Festival, 3 after 2013's Gala and the rest 3 after 2014's Gala. Every single interview was planned as about one hour. As the Spring Festival is a time in China for people to exhibit hospitality and openness, some interviews actually took longer time. In order to let the interviewees feel in control and comfortable, I allowed each of them to pick out a location for the interview.

The detailed interviewee list as follows:

M1 (age 33, post-doctoral researcher in biomedical technology)

M2 (age 44, male, journalist)

M3 (age 27, male, master student in business school)

M4 (age round 50, male, concierge of a local hotel)

M5 (age 58, male, civil servant)

M6 (age 48, male, civil servant)

M7 (age 82, male, retired ancient biology professor)

M8 (age around 50, male, dentist)

M9 (age 25, male, law school student)

F1 (age around 35, female, saleswoman)

F2 (age 47, female, budget analyst at a university)

F3 (age 32, female, college lecturer in political science)

F4 (age around 60, female, retired office manager)

F5 (age around 70, female, retired worker, previously employed in a state-owned enterprise)

F6 (age 69, female, retired worker, previously employed in a state-owned enterprise)

F7 (age 45, female, general office manager)

F8 (age 19, female, college student)

F9 (age around 50, senior engineer at a big publishing house)

#### Roadmap for the Interview

While starting the interview, I had in mind a largely organized open-ended question list, which began with the interviewee's demographic and social background and then some general questions as follow: What does the traditional Spring Festival mean to you (your family, parents, kids)? What kind(s) of activities you normally participate in during this festival (now, ten years ago, twenty years ago, etc.)? What

are your opinions about the CCTV's Spring Festival Gala (now, ten years ago, twenty years ago)? Why would you watch CCTV's Spring Festival Gala regularly (I selected regular viewers on purpose)? Then participants were encouraged to recall their recent year's viewing experiences.

Given that the central concern of the study was to learn about the interviewees' political subjectivity in regard to the discursive construction of "family" in contemporary China especially through CCTV's Spring Festival Gala. The following guiding questions were designed to directly provoke the participants' reflection(s) on this issue of concern:

1. Do you think that facilitating a collective imagination of Chinese nation as a super-family is at least one of the most explicit themes of the Gala? Do you notice that how the show defines or describes the collective "family"?
2. Do you feel that you identify with and belong to this "family" constructed by the Gala? If so, in your opinion, what does being this "family" 's member entail? If you feel not completely or completely not identify with it, could you please explain?
3. What do you think about the "strong presence" of the pop stars from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau and overseas in each and every gala?
4. What do you think about the minority groups' "colorful" appearance in the Gala? How about the appearance of the Military men and women? Sports and Space men or women?
5. The "greatness" of China as one of the major themes has always been showcased in the Gala. How does the representation of that "greatness" make you feel?
6. What do you think about the state *cum* party leaders appearing on this night's stage?
7. What's your opinion about those episodes that eulogize the great "family," the CCP, the state of the PRC and the Chinese nation as one and the same?

8. What you think is the major problem(s) in China nowadays? What is your opinion about the Gala' presentation or avoidance of this type of problem(s)?

In addition, instead of following the designed questions one by one, according to the previous experience, I knew that it would be far more productive to engage in the conversation and follow the flow of discussion leads by the interviewees. I just needed to make sure that the conversation did not go off-topic too much. In the meantime, I also gave particular attention to provoking additional information and points.

## **5.6 Tenors of the Voices**

Digging comprehensively and deeply online, and along the rapport being built up in my interview, I find three particular tenors of the voices among the viewers:

### **5.6.1 The “love-hate” complex resonating with audience’s ideological “jet-lag”**

One particular general question came first, which had puzzled and interested me for a long time: It was about love-hate complex among the audience. That is, let alone the mainstream media term the CCTV gala “the new folk tradition,” and the skyrocketing viewing rate, there was actually a strong love-hate relationship between Chinese audience and the show. Mostly in the informal channels (online and in-person conversation), beside small gestures like mocking what was supposed to be a touching account of sorrow and anger, there were also all sorts of direct criticism you can hear, such as “When would the Gala come to an end?” and “Holding the CCTV gala only exhausts the people and drains the resources,” “What a man-made spectacle ‘with Chinese characteristics’ and bogus happiness,” “Can you and me refuse the grand feast which calls for ‘every descendant of Emperors Yan and Huang’ to participate, but just have a happy meal with my own family?” etc. Netease, one of the most popular e-news portals in China, conducted an online survey among its users about

2013's CCTV Spring Festival Gala. The result indicated that an overall response to be unsatisfactory, with as high as 38.3 percent of 27,381 survey respondents who believed that 2013's Gala was a total "failure."<sup>6</sup> In my 18 interviews with the show's regular viewers, only 1 interviewee - a 33-year-old post-doctoral researcher (M1) now in the United States doing research on biomedical technology - said that he had been absolutely enjoying the show. Nine out of the rest 17 (over 50%) shared their opinions as they treated it as a "routine" way to kill the time of this particular night. The rest 8 interviewees (nearly 50%) more or less expressed their jeers, sneers or sarcasm towards the show. But still, what keeps Chinese people watching the show they complain about, every year, at the supposed-to-be-most-important family gathering night? Let's look closer:

*There is a voice among the interviewees that believed watching C-CTV's Spring Festival Gala has become a "habit."* One respondent M6 elaborated it: "Not long ago, there was few ways of entertainment in the general ordinary Chinese people's life. By then, CCTV's Spring Festival Gals was fantastic! It was the most splendid variety show on TV since it was created in the early 1980s. . . It is related to a habit. *It just becomes a habit. . .* We are habit animals, that is, we have carried on the habit to turn on TV and watch the show on the New Year's eve as it has been something people used to doing. Of course, with diversifying of the ways of entertainment, its influence is decreasing. People are no long particularly looking forward to the show. . . some people even goes further by hating the show for being a giant, formulaic existence and draining so many resources. But, without a doubt, in the majority's minds, *it is closely connected with the concept of 'guonian'* (celebrating the new year)."

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<sup>6</sup><http://ent.163.com/special/sncwmyd/>

There are actually 7 people from my interview expressed the similar opinion by mentioning watching CCTV's Spring Festival Gala was a "habit." F9 lamented that "In the past, people generally lived a materialistically deprived life, but they enjoyed much diversified ways to celebrate the new year, but now... Every year, the show is more or less the same. But do we actually have other choices? It seems the show has become the *only thing sustainable* about the celebration." On the contrary, F4 gave CCTV's Spring Festival Gala the credit as a "*modern cultural tradition*." She clearly knew about the sweeping criticism about the show, but she insisted that "You simply cannot please everyone."

*There is another voice which emphasized CCTV's Spring Festival Gala's significance as a way to link people together.* F2 who has been overseas for nearly 15 years said that ever since the infrastructure made it possible in 2003, she started to watch the show every new year eve, "yes, it is a *link* to those people back home... To be honest, without it, I don't know how to spend the should-be-special night here in the US."

Another interviewee F7 shared with me that "If there were any better choice, nobody would like to watch CCTV's Spring Festival Gala... You know the younger generation are just very briefly browsing the show. They will not watch it from beginning to the end. But *it feels fairly good to watch some episodes with your family members and discuss about them*."

F1 told me that "You know I have been watching it for years. Yes, all these episodes are similar, singing, dancing, joking - which is often not funny, saying things like we have a long history, a unique cultural tradition... you simply know what they're trying to sell... so predictable. It is actually boring, but you need to watch it in order to *discuss - even just criticize - it afterwards with your friends*."

Another respondent M4 put it in this way, "It is not a must-see. Actually recent several years' galas become more and more boring. *I watch it just in order to*

*discuss and more precisely criticize it with family and co-workers.*” F5 also shared with me that “If I didn’t watch it, I may have nothing to say in the following weeks with my old friends since *all of them would talk about it* in the park.”

M5 told me in an assertive way that “CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala will and must continue, no matter you and me like it or not, because there is no other form can achieve such a whole-country-celebrating-together atmosphere... by *linking so many families together*. There is part of our *collective memory*. It is thus irreplaceable.” (emphases added)

Since for the past thirty-two years, millions of Chinese have watched this yearly televised spectacle, it does constitute a stable collective memory reservoir, and ordinary Chinese constantly find a sense of community and connectedness from it, a common place to meet. In other words, a sense of belonging and community are created and maintained by a common televisual/ cultural consumption experience.

There were also plenty of voices from the virtual world addressing my puzzle, and it seemed that cynicism got the dominant position over there: One feedback from the netizen “Optimism” was interesting: “About the gala, I don’t have much to criticize. Two sentences: First, no matter how much money you spend on it, it is what it is. No good or bad. There are too many different criteria in different people’s minds. You simply cannot get everyone satisfied. Second, whether you sing high praise for the show or criticize it in full swing, does it matter? This way or the other, you watched the show, right? *CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala has been and is part of “guonian” (celebrating the new year). The truth is simply undeniable.*” Another netizen “Ma Busheng” put it in a rather direct cynical way: “The gala gives me a reason to be bored. In other words, without the gala, how can we come up a reason to be so blatantly bored together? Therefore, the gala gets my strong support. Even if there were no spring, they cannot stop making the spring festival

gala. If ‘spring festival gala’ comes, can spring be far behind?” Netizen “Promoter” even went beyond cynicism by stating his reason to watch the show as “I think no one can sleep at this particular night, simply because so many people are setting off firecrackers outside your window. So what am I supposed to do? Okay, just leave the TV on and the gala is almost in every channel... Do I have a choice?”

A feature article on *People’s Daily* even admitted that on the New “Snake” Year’s eve (2013), millions of CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala’s audience “put one eye on the TV screen, but the other on the screen of their computers.” They kept pushing “F5” (“refresh” key) and discussing about every detail with other netizens. For one, during the total 4.5 hours of the show, they generated 19,582,947 entries of the discussion about the show on *sina weibo* (Chinese version of Twitter).<sup>7</sup> The article concluded that “although there are full of sneers and sarcasm, but a fact is undeniable that ‘watching and criticizing the show has been a new custom’.”<sup>8</sup> This article also cited Ha Wen, the first ever female director of the show (2012, 2013): “I didn’t expect the audience to appreciate each and every episode... The significance of the show lies on its role as a ‘companion’.” On her own *sina weibo* right after the 2013’s show, she posted a short message by saying that “the show is gleeful, your guys’ criticisms are joyful too. I have to say the interaction is awesome. I am surely blessed if only I can bring all these joy into your life.” Although less direct, we can still see from these virtual voices that generally, the shadow of habit consumption and the fun of consuming in a collective way are two major reasons to allure people to sit in front of the TV at this specific night.

An answer to this psychological paradox that has been gradually revealed during my online participant observation and in-depth interview is that the contemporary China is going through an unprecedented ideological transition, while the Gala has

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<sup>7</sup>Chongdu Business News, <http://ent.163.com/13/0216/03/8NQB64IM00032DGD.html>

<sup>8</sup><http://media.people.com.cn/n/2013/0211/c40606-20478778.html>



provided the audience a possible way to ease their ideological tension, because the Gala constantly upholds the dismissing collective ideology as if it were still valid and dominant today. To be specific, given China's economic "takeoff" in the past several decades, ordinary people are clearly enjoying certain higher level of living standards and more individual freedoms in multiple senses in the contemporary society. However, the cold economic calculation and instrumentalist logic are fundamentally conflicting with Confucian hierarchy and reciprocal principles. Not to mention, there are suddenly increased social disparities and conflicts responding to economic gains and commodity consumption, including higher crime rate, unemployment, corruption, and rapid deterioration of social order. In other words, after promoting the radical socialism for three decades, the so-called "socialism with Chinese characteristics" in post-1989 China brings back the once fully denied capitalism and now practices capitalism just with a socialism face, which without a doubt caused plenty of ideological dizziness and uneasiness, not to mention along with the unprecedented economic pressure and radical social stratification. Chinese people's uneasiness with the social changes, to some extent, has facilitated the successful ideological operation of the Gala in post-socialist China. But this does not mean that the audience fully identify with ideological messages conveyed by the show.

Theoretically speaking, the ideological crisis, which I call it an ideological "jet lag," provides a wonderful chance to closely observe how the ideological remedy work is operating. In this context we see at play complex images and discourses on the stage of CCTV's Spring Festival Gala to help people relate to each other and to themselves. For example, "past" is re-packaged as a backward glance that promotes collective experience in terms of desires and losses, in order to touch people's heart. In other words, the radical socialism era is re-packaged almost as a different time as well as place. "Gala in the thirty years" section in 2012, together with other episodes in the previous and following years that invited back the stars and performers in the

1980s all earned genuine applause, and these episodes are repeatedly rated as the top program of each respective year's gala. The nostalgia for the past clearly resonated with the audience.

In a word, a temporary but strong ideological dizziness after the sudden withdrawal of the communist ideology which in fact on the personal level still has its effects on the memory and identification of the Chinese people, and the not-yet-fully-established market principle and logic, at play the most "legitimate" time of year to return and settle, is among the most relevant sociological and psychological reasons of the popularity of CCTV's Spring Festival Gala.

Therefore, I argue that the popularity of the CCTV's Gala cannot be explained merely as a result of official support and almost endless resources to utilize; it echoes the complex sentiment and need to return at a time marked by rapid economic and ideological transformations. I have argued in the previous chapter the role change of the party-state specifically at this night from demanding "overseeing" to pledging "being seen," and in this process to confirm its own very existence. Now with the individuals' response and participation, it completes the circle of this new mechanism of control. Here comes the caveat: it would be unfair if I don't point out the Gala's cultural value. After all, it attracts and recruits the best Chinese talents internationally.

However, although the grandiose staging dubbed with magnificent neon-lights and young, beautiful and talented performers and hosts/hostesses, on which one episode and another boasting the good life and wonderful future of socialist utopia with Chinese characteristics, this TV spectacle still draws upon a stock of obsolete phrases and formulaic imagery which the old generation are familiar with from the socialist era, an era known as everyday life was organized, rendered, and reduced in form, with ideology or political identity as its only content or depth (Tang, 2000). It may trigger

disgust and contempt when it reaches the limit and exhaust itself, i.e., being heard too many times.

### **5.6.2 The complex feeling towards the all-inclusive great “family”**

As we have already discussed in Chapter 4 that on this stage, the Gala has tirelessly promoted the images of the all-inclusive family called “Chinese Nation,” the revival of Chinese nation and of “the power and magic of being Chinese.” I noticed during my participant observation and interviews that the feeling towards this conception is rather complex:

First of all, all Chinese are educated to believe in the glory of China’s imperial past, which is as deeply rooted in Chinese people’s mind as their 20th century’s “century-long humiliation.” These two feelings are constantly motivated as a certain “wounded nationalism” to promote patriotism on this stage. And this night, on this specific stage of CCTV, it is suggested again and again that only the united and unitary big “national family” under the leadership of CCP will bring stability and social control, which in turn will lead to the economic prosperity and revive the strong, centralized olden civilization. All the particular strategies deployed aim at constructing comforting ideas of primordial ties and sentiments, of the greatness and the rootedness.

While when looking into it, although quite a portion of my interviewees enjoyed at least partially watching this Gala presenting China’s achievement in economics, culture, sports and space science on this festival stage, others did not. The same phenomenon can be found through my online observation.

To be specific, M5 told me in an assertive way that “Of course I enjoy this part... a strong nation should be strong at sports. So, to show them is to show the world how strong China is becoming. It makes every Chinese proud ... This is a forceful evidence that China is becoming a superpower! And space science! Of course! It

is a life-and-death competition with other superpowers.” And F4 believed that “Of course! We are Chinese, and all these certainly make Chinese proud. They represent our indomitable national spirit!” F6 commented that “Isn’t China’s economic achievements impressive? Even the Americans are afraid of us now...” In the meanwhile, there were also quite some voices heard during my interview or online observation, saying that “I know other Chinese probably believe in, but for me, the whole idea is arbitrary/ myopic/ deceptive, etc,” which through keeping using the third person plural pronoun suggests a perfect case of “third-person effect” (Davison, 1983). M4 explained to me that in the past, the economic, cultural, sports and scientific achievements worldwide did make him proud, “but I became more concerned about the poor people, especially those kids in the remote western rural areas... Enough food for them to survive and opportunities for them to get educated, for me, is far more important than the accumulative number of sports medals or outer space expenditures.” M2 told me that “yes, we all know that this night almost every show aims at bragging about China’s unprecedented achievements under CCP’s leadership. On this stage, China is always strong and prosperous, better and better... I know it is not true: social polarization, corruption, greed, lack of sympathy, just name a few... We all know about it. The paradise that is depicted on this stage stays on this stage and only exists at this night. After all, it is “*Guo Nian*” (celebrating the lunar new year), and everyone needs to forget bad things for a moment and find out something to be happy for, right?...” F9 was particularly conscious about the potential danger of the idea “China is finally run ahead of the world”: “After over a century on the inferior position, because of the sudden economic achievement, they have developed a complex superior feeling... But I am telling you getting rich is alienating the country. As you know so many things are cutting on hold or putting aside, just to let the economy soar solely. The society is facing a series of serious problems. CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala?... It is simply a show, a New Year celebration.” Nevertheless, the majority of

my interviewees and online correspondence and observations suggested that although people rejected CCP to take all the credits for development, they were proud of the strength and richness China showcases to the outside world. The inconsistent and even contradictory subject positions were commonly seen.

When talking about the specific “drifters return” theme on this stage, during the interview, some people expressed their excitement in seeing different Chinese coming back to celebrate together. M6 told me that he knew for sure that everything was “scripted,” but “for a moment, you do feel like ‘finally, we are here together,’ don’t you?” While, M9, a Columbia Law School student who grew up overseas and answered my questions with great eloquence, told me that he thought all those related episodes “funny, if not ironic”: “In order to emphasize the so-called ‘common bond,’ ‘shared blood’ and ‘all Chinese under heaven are brothers and sisters,” they invited overseas Chinese all over the world to this stage, implying that all Chinese descendants are emotionally home/China-bound... And these performers are just seemingly so into the idea... but after the night, they just keep ‘drifting.’ Fei Xiang, for example, who was so emotionally expressive and sang ‘Coming back! Coming back!’ twenty years ago and again this year, but he himself lives in NYC all the time.” M5, F3 and F7 all agreed that these performers competed for the chance to perform on this stage only to promote themselves. “Other than those first-generation immigrants, who may have a sincere feeling towards the motherland, we cannot really see this so-called homebound desire.” M8 commented and continued to say, “Aha, ‘China our lovely big family for all’? It is so blatantly ludicrous wishful thinking!” Here M5 brought in a very interesting point that he thought the whole show tried to intentionally mix people’s understanding about nostalgia towards one’s native home, towards one’s motherland, and towards the past era all together, in order to sell the idea that the current party-state as the sole centripetal core of all Chinese at this night. F2 revealed during the interview to me that she thought picking some representatives from different “minor

ethnicities” to sing and dance together are “hypocritical,” since “you tell me they are important and indispensable part of this big ‘family,’ but you just give them 30 seconds each...to dance and sing for your holiday. Is there a more revealing way to say ‘you are a side dish’?”

There is also a strong voice up against the phenomenon that high politics interferes with cultural festival. Tons of online articles and some of my interviewees expressed the similar idea that bluffing about the national revival was a “annoying party-state’s interference with an ancient cultural festival” (M3, M4, M7, M8, M9, F1, F2, F3, F8, and F9). M9 elaborated it in this way that “I don’t think you should stand in a line with the government or the regime to enjoy a folk festival...To put it in a serious way, it is a cultural kidnap (for what CCP has been doing)! Cultural legacy and identity are something inside of you. Okay, the party-state can organize or sponsor such an event for us, but we also have every right to enjoy it in our own way.” F3 was particularly articulate on this point because of her Ph.D. training in Political Science. She thought that the narrative of familial loyalty was a character of Mao’s era, a golden era of CCP’s moral legitimacy. That the show promotes it with full swing makes it a “historically specific politics of representation”, and “every episode contains a certain political sense,” especially in an era “social disorder and political instability are still frequently reminded in order to emphasize the necessity to follow one hegemonic leader and build the harmonious society.” M3 was rather outspoken on this point by jeering “I can not tell is it a New Year’s celebration, an entertainment show, or a political gathering of any kind? Should there be any differences at all?! Aha!” F9 repeatedly emphasized that I should understand CCP and Chinese Nationality as totally two different concepts. In such a cultural festival, the party-state should not be present at all. People recalled and reflected about since the very early years of this regime, how anti-Confucius campaign came one after another until the acme of Cultural Revolution. The consequence is a sudden

rupture of tradition (M2, M3, M7, M8, F2, F5, F6, and F9). For example, quite some people believed that the cultural festival actually lacked of “culture.” They had been fed with some superficial things and presented them superficially year after year. M7 commented that ancient Chinese classics were still seriously absent from public education system, which led to Chinese people lack of relatively deep understanding about its own culture, except the politically defined one. He even mentioned that actually nowadays Taiwan was doing a better job in keeping the traditional Chinese culture. M9 who grew up overseas put it in this way: “If you really want to attract ‘all the Chinese under the heaven,’ please show more things we share in common. Other than black hair, black eyes, yellow skin, and especially other than the ‘big brother’ if not ‘father’ figure, we also share ancient history, beautiful language, rich custom, great artists and musicians. . . CCP is actually the biggest barrier between you and me, cannot you see?”

In a word, according to my interviewees’ general responses and my online participatory observation, people react to the repeated narrative of the Chinese united and unitary “national family” with rather complex emotions, if not a direct refusal.

### **5.6.3 “Small” or “*minjian*” is emerging from and competing with the grand narrative(s)**

As aforementioned, theoretically speaking, one of the most significant changes in contemporary China’s society and politics, in my point of view, is that the alternative narratives about small, self, private are emerging from and competing with the grand narrative(s). Its emergence has been discussed in the previous chapter, while here in this part, I am curious in observing how the “small” narrative appearing on this specific big screen will affect ordinary people’s self-identification. One good example that reveals the newly-acquired legitimacy of “self” (read: “individuality” nowadays, but “selfishness” in the past) can be found in some of my interviewees’ derision about

the “sameness,” “one in all” of the sportsmen and space heroes. M3, M4, M8, M9, F2 and F9 all pointed out that these people almost look identical to each other, with no facial expressions at all. Similar comments also frequent the most traffic-loaded cyberspace. While, different from my interview experience, where there were still voices considering the night’s show(s) “very powerful,” “great,” “pleasant and upbeat,” “touching,” etc., or more specifically by saying “The stage scene is more and more elaborate,” during my participatory observation in the cyberspace, there were more systematic voices full of jeers, sneers and sarcasm. Typical one may read as follow:

“I would say that the whole thing is an intentional or not intentional, blind happiness which is not generated from the people! Does it show any real consideration of us, the regular everyday people? Maybe...but all I can remember is just direct or indirect echoes of those high-pitch words from the top. It is all about high politics, party-state, motherland, etc. ...Some time I forgot it is supposed to be ***our*** festive - I mean a traditional and organic thing of ourselves!” (huaren.us, “Let’s talking about your experience with CCTV Gala,” Netizen *Flower in the Water*, January 23, 2012)

To be fair, if we say that in the past years, what clearly missing from the Gala is ordinary people’s bottom-up, “organic” way of celebrating the new year, nowadays, the obvious change is that other than celebrating the national achievements and praising the always righteous CCP, ordinary people’s life is gradually becoming a significant part of this stage at this evening. In Zhongdang Pan’s words (2010), other than solely focuses on the unity, harmony and festivity, ordinary grassroot folks’ potentially conflict-exposing way of celebration is also becoming visible. Therefore, this night on this stage, in the name of celebrating the biggest holiday in China, different ideologies, which may be contradictory or at least logically inconsistent, are



presented side by side. It is revealing regarding the current pragmatic nature of Chinese politics, and suggesting something more than that.

#### 5.6.4 Summing up

Deepening into the “field” helps us to know a whole range of different interpretations the audience have made when watching the Gala. Although it does give rise to a certain sense of celebration and belonging among its worldwide Chinese viewers, many are often well aware of its ideological intention to some degree, if not fully. This of course will cause confusing and conflicting emotions. As a result, we see in the virtual as well as actual discourse spaces, teemed with large-scale contestations.

There are context-specific conditions that behind this kind of large-scale contestations: Firstly, as aforementioned, thanks to the economic reform and globalization, Chinese audience gradually realize that they have the power as the actual consumers of the cultural commodity to exert their certain influence on the production. Not to mention, CCTV has repeatedly claimed that its Spring Festival Gala is prepared with whole heart “for the ordinary people,” which without a doubt provides a somehow “legitimate” opening for public criticism. Moreover, as we know that Spring Festival is the most important traditional holiday in China. The specific moment of the year itself has certain magic power to suspend the original relationship between the media, the government, and the people. That is, as a critical moment, during this time of a year the official hegemony might be destabilized and a window of opportunity would be open up for the people to be more outspoken than normal situations would allow.

Right on time, the structure change in general and the proliferation of Internet and other citizen digital technologies in particular create alternative spaces to destabilize the Gala’s alleged authority and stage rich expressed (thus “material”) suspicion, indifference, resentment, and mockery toward this performative media event. More interestingly, it provides a nuanced understanding about the political awareness and

subjectivity in the contemporary China - different from the earlier years or in other situations, who must get along with the party's social, cultural, political visions as a strategy of survival or source of safety, those who are caught up in such a "participation" in the Spring Festival eve's gala are well aware of their fulfilled needs are not necessarily overlapped with the party-state's intention, and sometimes if necessary, know how to build a buffer to protect and sustain the awareness. Lisa Wedeen (1999) defines this kind of situation as "the utilitarian compliance," which "implies a bargain rather than obedience" (p.145). In this sense, it isn't all about passive, cynical appearances, but related to individual fulfillment to some degree. I believe all these readings of this Gala capture a very revealing moment in the negotiation of symbolic power in the post-Maoist state.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

*When and why do men obey?*

—Max Weber identified as one center question in the study of politics

*It is obvious that no one scholar can hope to offer a survey of all the relevant cultural and political expressions of the period in the search for their underlying patterns of familial imagery. I certainly do not claim to account for every engraving, painting, or novel in my analysis, but I do hope to offer an account of the links between family images and power that will prompt others to examine their own sources in new lights.*

—Lynn Hunt (1993, p.14-15)

#### 6.1 Between Symbolic Family and Power

A lot of pedagogical imperatives and disciplinary practices have been deployed by the party-state in the post-Tiananmen China, in ways that serve to displace or disguise internal contradictions and political contestations. Among them, no other discursive site exceeds the power of “family” to condense the complex emotions and imaginations about the past and future of Chinese society and people in a statist or nationalist way. Particularly, in the development of a new cultural politics and political culture in an era of increasing integration into the neo-liberal global order at the expense of previously promised socialist structure and values, the unified and unitary national family, as exemplified in the most influential television spectacle

produced by CCTV — Spring Festival Gala, has been once again re-energized as a national unifying symbol.

Informed by cultural studies and ethnographic methods, this research project explores how the post-collectivism party-state insists on a mirror image of the collectivism through constructing the country as a singular super “family” from the olden time. To be specific, I exhibit how the party-state utilizes its new techniques of governing in the televised spectacle, by resorting to China’s traditional cultural heritage and realizing the big normative traditional “national family.” In the process, the ancient tradition of Spring Festival as the most celebrated time of family-gathering of the year, provides Chinese party-state the golden opportunity to promote the idea of the traditional all-encompassing family. This central discursive feature of this show, generally, is to displace specific family reunion with the images that all Chinese transcend their economic, political, ethnic and geographic differences and celebrate their common bonds together. I argue all these colorful, sweet, cozy and nostalgic images of roots, blood-ties, family, shared cultural heritage packaged on this stage, which represent the regime’s idealized relations of domination and submission, aim at making power “palpable and publicly visible” (Wedeen, 1999, p.21), and also trying to ground political thinking, making it harder imagine and enact an alternative version.

In the meantime, the Gala also dramatizes the party-state’s inability to form together a seamless and unproblematic unity, as shown by the close readings of the audience reception. To be specific, although “family” enjoys a superior position in Chinese politics and society as it is rooted in commonly shared social values and in Chinese’s everyday conceptual system, upholding the “many in one” idea which reflects the legacy of the previously-dominant ideological framework, actually invokes complex and uneasy relationship between the party-state and the ordinary Chinese people.

In a word, the dissertation explores the new propaganda and its effects on Chinese people's political subjectivity, against the background combining the dying Communist ideology, the rise of neo-liberalism, the proliferating social technologies, and the tremendous human dislocation in contemporary China. The relatively "soft" or "non-totalizing" authoritarian China after 1989 makes it especially suited, on the one hand, to reveal the way of state's attempts on symbolic control, in an era lack of the true belief or emotional commitment towards the central force of governance, on the other hand, to see how the whole set of top-down symbolic strategies are transgressed by individuals' tactics. The core of this research is to "return to the individual" as Havel suggests, to help people understand politics, as well as culture, in relation to themselves individually.

## **6.2 Further Concern: "Return Gaze" Real-izes and Reassures the Power**

Of course, the phenomenon that the official language and imaginary invokes contestations if not subversions is not new under either the post-totalitarian regimes or the democratic ones. However, here what raises my further concern is that, in the post-totalitarian China, there is a visible tendency of the ordinary Chinese that cannot or will not appropriate a brand-new alternative ground but simply inscribe their resistance into existing systems of significance. That is, nowadays in China, most forms of resistance exploit the discourses or images that symbolically loaded in Chinese politics and culture and thus shared by the regime. To put it in another way, the ruled share the vocabulary with the ruler and situate their resistance in the very same conceptual system they strive to reorder.

This kind of phenomena has been notified by researchers. At the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, the "Mao Zedong Fever" was a quite telling case: Michael Dutton (1999) demonstrates how the revolutionary past was reinvented and commodified, exempli-

fied in Mao-themed restaurants, the construction of the massive Mao theme park, the collections of Mao badges, etc. Dai Jinhua (2003) also captures the phenomenon and argues that this “fever” signifies an imaginary redemption from the unsatisfactory status quo and a nostalgic return to the past. While, Dutton believes that it is the underprivileged that employed their own tactics of resistance to the rapid ideological transformation and social corruption, and responded within the same code system but employing alternative, contesting meaning. Dutton further argues that commodification has to a great extent killed the solemnity and holiness of original version. The same argument is also seen in the popular discussions about Cui Jian’s songs and Wang Shuo’s novels throughout the 1980s and 1990s - the marginalized subculture exploited the typical official language to ridicule the “aura” of the revolutionary myths or even poke fun from the very text of them. They both got very popular by then and thus brought in the devastating subversion of official symbolic universe.

Fighting on one and the same battlefield has its strength as the old Chinese saying emphasizes the power and delicacy “to refute someone with his own argument” (*Yi Zi Zhimao, Go Zi Zhidun*). While, I agree to scholars who claim that, more importantly, it is the communist power structures that controlled the political imagination of the Chinese people for so long that it became practically impossible to completely think out of the box. For example, Gregory Lee (1996) expounds that even the pro-democracy Chinese activists during and after the Tiananmen crackdown were unable to imagine a “liberatory politics beyond the confines of the nation-state” (p. 40). Instead, their rhetoric that sought to challenge official discourses echoed the same old patriotic, nationalistic discourse once employed by the CCP; that is, practically, by employing the regime’s own nationalist grammar, to argue that they have the same nationalist right to participate in Chinese politics.

Then here comes the united and unitary super “family” - the particular political imaginary, the all-inclusive metaphor the party-state tirelessly invokes even after the

collectivization era through CCTV's Spring Festival Gala. As discussed in Chapter 2, "family" in China is supposed to have the incomparable hailing power, to borrow from Foucault, which has no "exteriority," and competing interpretations are supposed to be foreclosed. But as we know that even the most authoritative text cannot avoid the possibility of a plurality of readings. While, this culturally and emotionally resonant symbol is not easy to control, since after all "family" is supposed to be part of our own private world, which gives the ruled room for maneuver and negotiation. Not to mention, the "family" in Chinese reality is getting more and more private as partly the result of economic development and people's dislocation. Then there is no wonder that the highly political loaded while also most quotidian issue of "family" will engender the constant contestations over interpretations. Indeed, the CCTV's gala, together with its highly totalistic defined "family," has created one of the most active forums for popular criticism and opened discussions about official ideology and culture in China every year. Kuan-Hsing Chen (1998) comments that "whether these popular practices could transform the rigidity of statist form remain an open-ended question; but the very existence of such form does indicate cultural resources available for 'creative local responses to global capitalism and nationalistic cultural hegemony'" (p.33). Earlier de Certeau (1984) claimed that since ordinary people use the resources provided by the powerful for tactical resistance, the "common conceptual system" also facilitates the resistance to be more comprehensible and communicable; moreover, on the higher level, the exploitations of the symbols and rhetoric of the regime also challenge the conditions that authorize the regime itself. His argument certainly has its own merits; but I want to hear something promising beyond the "resistance," since I argue that resistance, to a certain extent, also reinforces the embedment of the official meanings and its idealized version. In other words, the often largely tolerated criticism during this specific time of a year could function to real-ize and reassure the repressive forces' dominance rather than undermining it. It makes power more visible, by from bottom-

up completing the self-confirming system of representation. By “beyond resistance,” I mean something more “organic,” autonomous in the contemporary Chinese society. In this specific case about the Spring Festival celebration, people can utilize the resources available and through creative collaboration to celebrate their own most important festival together.

### **6.3 Look Ahead: Virtual Celebration, Virtual China**

We have argued that CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala is a spectacle, since as we know the careful arrangement and circulation of signs and images govern every angles and aspects of the show. Gazing at the spectacle, the used-to-be active participants in the traditional celebration are replaced by those who only sit in the living room and passively consume the images and narratives on the screens. To make things worse, using Lisa Wedeen’s words, “Spectacles not only provide an occasion to enforce obedience, but also represent this enforcement, thereby serving to create a metalite of popular powerlessness that helps produce the regime’s power anew” (1999, p.147). Debord (1994 [1967]) explains, for the ordinary people, the more he contemplates the less he lives; the more he accepts the dominant images, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. Probably it is the reason Chinese often complain that there is no atmosphere of the old “*Nian*” in their life, except watching the CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala and “celebrate” with the “whole country” together. Little by little, this televised show has changed the fabric of family and community regarding the celebration of Spring Festival. No matter how “interactive” the show is



announced,<sup>1</sup> people are not celebrating it in an extended family or a true community defined by proximity as it used to be.

Someone may still remember that we used to celebrate the holiday all by ourselves, with our family, neighbors, community member, interactively, creatively and locally. And the later, the sense of participatory community, is the basis required for the cultivation of democratic agency. Almost all the people I interviewed during the fieldwork more or less expressed their nostalgia and/or yearning towards the traditional ways of new year celebration. Luckily, we are in an era that physical proximity is no longer one of the key definers of “community”: Xueqin Zhu (2006) once expounds in an online article with surprisingly pleasant feeling that “the ‘mouthpiece’ China is deeply phony, while the ‘virtual’ China is closer to the reality.” Celebrating the Spring Festival for example, in the new age marked by the proliferating uses of social media, we see the phenomenon as thousands and millions of ordinary Chinese nowadays choose to convene in a virtual space in the Spring Festival eve to express their opinions and thoughts for the past year, exchange good wishes for the coming year, console those Internet friends who are away from their own home and family at that night, discuss together about what “traditional” Chinese new year should be, and even organize to meet offline and travel together in the following holiday period to search for the “authentic Chinese year” in the countryside, etc. A good example I came across is that on the eve of the 2013’s Spring Festival, the graduates of 2001 cohort from Rudong High school Class 06 made an arrangement to meet together in a private chat room in Sina.com. Therefore, the classmates who now work or study

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<sup>1</sup>The show employs more and more hi-tech gadgets to make dazzling special effects in order to advance a more interactive experience. During the night, the hosts and hostess constantly interrupt the show to remind the audience nationwide to “vote for your favorite show” through the Internet via cctv.com, SMS, and the telephone hotline. It also encourages the audience to participate into the lucky draw and quiz contest to win prizes. The huge number of the hits on their website and messages or phone calls they received are also constantly announced.

all cross the country may have the chance to get together and celebrate the biggest holiday in their own way.

To search for the “authentic Chinese year” clearly suggests that the very idea of “authentic Chinese” created by media is regarded by these people as questionable or at least ambiguous. Because of a series of radical anti-tradition movements motivated from the top in modern Chinese history, as Cao Wenxuan (1988) points out, despite the so-called long and rich cultural tradition, Chinese people generally lack the sense of cultural history, that is, are ignorant of their own cultural origins and thus cultural identity. This kind of bottom-up connection, celebration, reflection and exploration is therefore of special significance. Moreover, except a few people who gather together in the virtual way actually “know” or are familiar with each other from previous online experiences, most of them here at the night are strangers, but the shared cultural heritage is a virtual bond and people do feel solidarity under this circumstance. We have discussed in Chapter 2 that in Chinese society, one of the most fundamental ways to define an individual is through his or her social relationships. That is, a person’s association with family and other immediate persons in his or her social life plays a crucial role in defining the personal identity. Nowadays, although the traditional organic family-centered social fabric has been disintegrated due to both political and economic reasons, the new social media certainly promise new ways for Chinese people to relate to each other. Although the net friends may never meet in person, this kind of relationship still helps to consolidate their personal identity in the process of, for example, discussing tradition and celebrating traditional holiday together. In other words, it has certainly promoted a sense of belonging and rootedness in a time of the ever rapid transition and dislocation.

Lisa Wedeen (1999) expounds in *Ambiguous Domination*, “Competition among sycophants is politically beneficial for a regime insofar as it isolates participants from one another” (p.40-41). While, in China, as we can see, in tandem with the enlarged

structural space, emerging social media provide loose social networks and suggests a quasi-political community to powerfully support a giant group of informed and deliberative netizens to participate and join in meaningful discussion and further offline activities - in this case, to improve people's understanding of the most important festival in Chinese culture - Spring Festival, and further bake the new organic understanding about individual, family, and the overarching structure. Little by little, I expect to see through the organic ways individual Chinese constructs more and more values and discourses of their own, and in the course of their different daily experiences, from words to deeds, to develop the new public "personality," the genuine political self, which powerfully suggests new political possibilities.

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